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OR,
The Old Well Mystery.

BY JO PIERCE,
(Of the New York Detective Force.)
AUTHOR OF "FIVE POINTS PHIL," "BOB O' THE
BOWERY," "TARTAR TIM," "GAMIN BOB,"
"NORTH RIVER NAT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MURDERED "SQUIRE."

THE inquest was over, and the coroner's jury
had brought in a verdict that old "Squire"
Hemenway had died at the hands of persons to
them unknown.

Murdered!

The word had an ugly sound, which sent the
cold shivers running along one's veins, and when
it was considered that the good old squire had

"I FOUND DIS IN DE OLD WELL!" THE IRISH BOY DECLARED. IT WAS A LONG-BLADED
BUTCHER KNIFE. NICK GAZED AT IT WITH EXPANDED EYES.

been foully slain, it was worse yet. A man who had never made an enemy—yet he had been murdered.

Mystery hung darkly, ominously, painfully about the matter. The coroner's jury had tried to obtain light, but all their work had been in vain.

Noclew had been gained to the identity of the assassin.

The shades of night were falling, and Nicholas Hunter stood and looked drearily at the big, old-fashioned building from which the old squire would go forth no more—from which he had gone forth to rest in the bosom of mother earth until the end of the world.

Nicholas was only a boy, and a humble one at that. He had been an employee of Squire Hemenway, though not in his service in the full sense of the word. He had done odd jobs at various times, sometimes as a help of Martin Connors, the superintendent of Hemenway's farm, but more especially had he been the old gentleman's attendant when he drove about town on official business.

It was generally known that he went along simply because the old squire liked him, for he was not needed to watch the slow-going old black horse Hemenway drove.

The latter had been kind to Nicholas, and the boy had repaid him by lavishing all his affection upon the good old man. Nicholas was of very humble origin. His father was a fish-peddler, old, poor in pocket, uneducated, and, on the whole, ignorant. From his mother the boy had inherited an active, intelligent mind, but she died when he was five years of age, and for ten years he had almost "brought himself up," as the neighbors expressed it.

In early years the lad had been noted for unusual quickness of wit and a rather sharp tongue; and, because of this, he had been nicknamed "Nick Nettle."

As he grew older he saw that saucy boys were universally disliked, and he became as respectful to all who deserved it as the best-trained boy of the town. His quick wit remained, and to the day of our story he was called Nick Nettle.

The death of the old squire was a severe blow to him, and his heart was heavy as he stood looking at the big house on the evening before referred to.

The old squire had been murdered, and, thus far, he was unavenged. The officers of law were at work, but, as before stated, the coroner's jury had not been able to name the guilty party, or parties.

Yet, there were suspicions, and the voice of rumor was busy with the names of Martin Connors, Sarah Connors and Jason Bostwick.

Who were they?

Connors was the superintendent of the Hemenway farm; Sarah was his wife; and Jason Bostwick was the old squire's heir.

These persons were suspected, and the first two had been sharply questioned—Bostwick lived in another State, and had not yet appeared on the scene. Then, it may be asked, why was he suspected? Simply because an unknown man had been seen coming out of the house, and many of the neighbors believed it to have been Bostwick.

All questioning, however, failed to implicate Connors and his wife, and they went their way, not proven guilty, and not proven innocent.

The particulars of the murder were as simple as they were tragic. Squire Hemenway had been found dead in bed, the morning of July twenty-first. He had been stabbed to the heart, but the knife was not to be found. There were no noticeable signs of a struggle, and, as far as was known, no robbery had been committed.

The occupants of the house had been Connors and his wife, and a servant-girl named Ellice Cone. Nobody suspected the latter, for, though not regarded as very bright, she was believed to be a good-hearted creature; but the Connors had never been liked—hence, the suspicions against them.

Add to this that they had seemed to be hand-in-glove with Jason Bostwick when he made his rare visits to his uncle, and the vague ground for suspicion may be seen.

Hemenway was known not to like Bostwick, and it was thought that he intended to make a will which would cut his nephew off from the inheritance.

Suspicion seized upon all these circumstances, and when Thomas Nelson, a villager, certified that he had seen a man coming out of the old house on the night of the murder, Rumor leaped to a conclusion.

This man had been Bostwick, and he had killed the old squire, aided by the Connors. So said Rumor, but there was not an atom of evidence to prove it.

Nick Nettle thought of all this as he stood in the gloom and looked at the old house. He, too, suspected Connors, if not Bostwick, but the fear was strong within him that the mystery of the tragedy would never be cleared up.

While he stood there a man advanced along the road. Nick saw at once that he carried some sort of a traveling-bag, and grew interested, and when the unknown knocked at the door he grew doubly interested.

One moment he hesitated, and then he decided:

"I'll see if it is Bostwick!"

He quitted his place of observation and walked toward the house. At first he moved rapidly, but soon abated his pace. He was fully satisfied that he would be employed no more at Hemenway house. Martin Connors did not like him, and would probably treat him roughly if he was seen.

Hence Nick determined to use secrecy.

Availing himself of the well-known position of the various buildings, he approached the house at the rear. He knew there was no better place to make an observation of the kitchen, and to this room the visitor was likely to go.

Silently he glided forward until he gained the desired position. Then he made use of his visual organs.

Connors and his wife were there; and there, too, was a tall, dark-faced man who was no stranger to Nick. As he had expected, the visitor was Jason Bostwick.

The latter had removed his hat and taken a chair. Connors and his wife both stood near.

The first sight of the trio gave Nick Nettle a feeling of additional resentment. The old squire seemed utterly forgotten—or did these persons rejoice that he was gone? No shadow of his tragic death seemed to rest upon them; they were laughing and talking as cheerfully as though the grim destroyer, Murder, had never stalked through the house.

Nick felt a choking sensation in his throat. He was only fifteen years old, and Squire Hemenway had been the kindest of friends.

"I want to hear what they are saying," thought the boy, and he moved close to the window.

The voices were then clearly audible.

"I little thought when I was here last that I would come now as master of the place," remarked Bostwick, looking around with an air of satisfaction.

"Strange things sometimes happen," replied Connors, nodding.

"As, for instance, here."

"Just so."

"No clew to the slayer, Martin?"

"No, sir."

"Any drift at the inquest?"

Connors rubbed his bristly chin.

"Well, yes."

"Ah! What was it?"

"They put the screws on me."

"On you?"

"Yes."

"Lord save us! How was that?"

"Oh! you see the old fools had to poke their noses somewhere, and show their wisdom, so they lit on me."

Bostwick looked sharply at his companion.

"Did they accuse you, Mart?"

"No; but I was questioned right sharp. You see, I ain't a favorite in town, and I had to bear the blame of not being a goody-goody."

"Did they say anything definite?"

"No."

"Then I reckon they don't suspect you."

"Oh! as to that, they can't prove a thing against me."

"I wish we could fix up an alibi," put in Mrs. Connors.

"Don't try it!" emphatically replied Bostwick. "You'll get into a mess if you try to lie out of it, and I don't believe you are in the least danger."

"I don't care a cuss for them!" declared Connors.

"I'll help you out, if suspicion takes a definite form. I am now master of Hemenway, and after all you have done to make me that, I am not going to go back on you."

"Suppose you are suspected too?"

Bostwick laughed.

"I am safe enough. I am going to benefit, not lose, by the death of the old man."

"I hope so, Mr. Bostwick."

"Have you reason to believe there is a will?" abruptly asked the visitor.

"No."

"Nobody has claimed to know of one?"

"Not in my hearing."

"Have you searched again?"

"No."

"I propose to do it this very night. I don't like the present situation; you know how complicated it is. I call myself master of the old squire's broad acres, but my hopes hang on a thread. I shall never be satisfied as things stand."

"I'd hate to see you lose the farm, sir."

"By the fiends, I don't mean to lose it!" declared Bostwick, striking his knee. "I've risked too much to lose now. We unto any one who gets in my way!"

"He may get served as the old squire did," muttered Connors.

"He may, yes."

"No, no!" exclaimed Mrs. Connors. "Don't say that. I've seen enough of that sort of thing. Ugh! it makes my blood cold."

Bostwick laughed.

"You're all right, Sarah, and I know it; but I don't think there will be more blood shed. Now, give me a bite to eat; I will search for the will afterwards!"

CHAPTER II.

THE GARRET MYSTERY.

THE woman began to hurry around to get her new master's supper, while Connors and Bostwick talked in a tone which carried no words to the hearing of the listening boy.

Nick Nettle had found this conversation deeply interesting. It was strange talk for innocent persons. The trio had shown their want of decent feeling clearly, and much that they had said was suggestive in the extreme.

His old suspicions grew stronger. The talk had been just such, he thought, as they would have used had they been guilty of murdering Squire Hemenway; it was clear that they had done something that was not open to the light of day.

Mrs. Connors set out a quantity of food on the table, and Bostwick began eating with good appetite. He was in the best of spirits, and talked of unimportant matters in a lively way, which made his more ignorant companions laugh heartily.

In the meanwhile Nick was meditating. Bostwick had said that he would search for "the will" as soon as he had finished eating. Nick had a strong desire to know the result of this search, and there seemed to be but one way of doing it.

This was to enter the house secretly.

He knew this would not be hard; he had so often been inside with the old squire that he knew nearly as much about the place as any other person. It was not lack of means which caused him to hesitate. It was the fact that he must enter unlawfully, if at all, and he was too honorable to fancy such work.

"I can't do it," he decided.

Then he thought of the murdered squire, and the possibility that such a step might lead to the unmasking of the guilty parties.

His mind changed; he determined to make the attempt.

After that the rest was easy. Passing around one corner of the house he came to a shed in the form of a "lean-to." It was the work of but a few moments to gain the roof of this, and, as he ascended, he was brought to a window at the end of the main house.

The next question was, was it fastened? He knew it had never been in the old squire's day. He tried it. It yielded readily to his touch.

All beyond was perfectly dark, but he moved quietly inside. He had no fear of being discovered then. The only other inmate of the house besides those in the kitchen—the servant-girl, Ellice Cone—had gone to her home, temporarily or permanently.

Nick knew that he must play a sharp game while Bostwick's search was going on, and he at once took what he thought was a favorable position. He did not intend to stay all the while in one place, but move around as was necessary—something which the arrangement of the big, square house made feasible.

He stood by the door of a certain room and waited. The voices of the trio below were dimly audible. A few minutes passed, and then he heard Bostwick move back from the table.

The crisis was near at hand.

A short pause followed, and then steps sounded on the stairs. Bostwick, Martin and Sarah slowly ascended. The former bore a lamp in his hand.

"Where will you look first?" Martin asked.

"In the old man's room."

"I have rummaged there pretty thoroughly."

"I'll give it another try. Is it just as it was left, Sarah?"

"Lord love you, yes," replied Mrs. Connors. "You don't ketch me fooling around there."
 "Why not?"
 "The old man was killed there."
 "What of that?"
 "His ghost might appear to me."
 Bostwick laughed lightly.

"Bless you, only the guilty need fear ghostly visitors. Of course *your* feelings were always of the kindest sort toward the old man."

He poked Sarah facetiously in the ribs, but the woman uttered a little cry.

"Don't sir—don't!" she added. "I ain't got over the shock of his death yet; my nerves are upset."

"Women will be women," quoth Connors. "My nerves are of the best sort."

"And I," added Bostwick, "am not as much afraid of Squire Hemenway's ghost as I was of the old man. Come on!"

They entered the dead man's chamber.

Nick Nettle crept further forward until he could see into the room. There was then no danger of discovery. All the others were in the room, and the light did not fall upon him.

Bostwick set down the lamp and looked around. His face expressed only curiosity. There the old squire had slept of nights for forty years; there he had been foully slain; and the naked bed looked dreadfully suggestive of the tragedy; but none of these things had any effect upon Bostwick.

"Now, where is the will?—if there is one?" he continued. "None was handed into Maybury's office; if the old man has one, it must be hidden about this house. Did you look in the bureau, Martin?"

"In every drawer, sir."

"I'll try my luck. Hold the light!"

He sat down before the bureau, and began the search. Each drawer was examined in succession. Mrs. Connors stood by, looking fearfully around. Nick Nettle watched from his place, scarcely stirring.

Bostwick did his work thoroughly. Every paper was submitted to a close examination, but as there were not many of them, the work was soon done.

"Nothing here," he commented. "Only two places are left in this room."

"I looked in the chest," observed Connors.

"And under the carpet?"

"No."

"I shall look there. The squire was rather eccentric; he may have hidden the will, or some other valuable document there."

The speaker examined the "chest"—a large, old-fashioned box—but without success. Next he looked under the edges of the carpet. Again he was disappointed; not a scrap of paper was found there.

"We must try the other rooms," he said. "I begin to think there may have been no will. The squire would have been foolish to hide it outside his room, but all history is full of strange things and men's eccentricities. We will look."

Nick Nettle retreated discreetly. He had an idea where the search would be resumed, and governed himself accordingly. He had surmised rightly, and Bostwick went through another room. A third and a fourth followed—and then only an unfinished store-room, filled with odds and ends of furniture and other things remained. This room was called "the garret."

"No easy job here," muttered Bostwick, as he looked inside.

"But just the place to hide a thing," added Connors.

"Egad! you're right. Pokerish, isn't it? Look out for spooks, Sarah."

"You said that only the guilty need fear them," retorted the woman, plucking up a little spirit.

"Good, old woman; and that leaves us out, of course."

The boy watcher found all this very suggestive. Although nothing had been said in the way of a direct confession, much of their conversation could be interpreted to mean that they were the murderers of the good old squire.

Nick felt that he had been justified in such steps as he had taken. The trio looked like typical desperadoes. Connors and his wife were coarse, brutal-faced and repulsive, while dark, imperious-looking Bostwick was not a man to win confidence.

The latter took the lamp and made a circuit of the room. There was a recess next to the eaves, and into this he peered nervously as he went. Several small objects were found and examined, but the will was not there.

He went on perseveringly.

It was a peculiar, striking scene. The light of the lamp, broken by boxes and barrels, often

piled one upon another, penetrated but a short distance, and erratic shadows were thrown all about. A gloomy, weird scene, and, practical as Nick Nettle was, he felt the effects of it.

Bostwick began to move some of the boxes.

Nick leaned forward and continued his close watch of everything; there seemed less danger of discovery than ever before.

"Hullo!" Bostwick suddenly exclaimed, "what's this?"

He held up a small package.

"Something wrapped in a piece of oiled silk," returned Connors.

"And well tied up. Do you know what it is?"

"Never saw it before."

"I'll cut the strings and see. It can't have been there long, for there is no dust upon it. What if we have the will, at last?"

He drew his knife and was about to cut the string. Connors and his wife bent forward with eager interest. Then something strange happened.

Mrs. Connors uttered a subdued scream. An arm had glided over Bostwick's shoulder; a hand had clasped the package; and Bostwick stood with his own hands empty.

The package had been snatched away from him by a mysterious power.

A moment later and Nick Nettle, standing at the garret door, saw a dark form rushing directly toward him.

CHAPTER III.

THE BRUTE BETRAYER.

NICK NETTLE was a cool-headed boy, but for once he lost his presence of mind. The presence of the dark form was an utter surprise to him. He was not superstitious, if Mrs. Connors was, and he knew it was a human being, yet it was none of the trio, and he had not imagined that any one else was in the house.

The sudden appearance dazed him, and, before he recovered his wits enough to move, the unknown was at hand.

Nick tried to dodge to one side, but he was too late.

The unknown ran full into him.

Another moment and Nick was sprawling upon his back, while the unknown continued his rapid flight without a thought, it seemed, of the boy who had been in his way.

Bostwick was freeing his mind angrily, and none too politely, and he started forward with the lamp, bound to catch the thief.

Discovery stared Nick Nettle in the face, but luck was in his favor. Puff! came a breath of wind through the window, and out went the light. The garret was plunged into darkness.

Bostwick's voice arose more angrily than ever and he flung the lamp away. It fell and broke with a crash, but he did not stop. He ran toward the garret door at full speed.

As chance would have it, Nick was just rising, and, as a consequence, he was in the man's way. Once more he was run into, but the odds were in his favor this time; he had barely gained his knees, and Bostwick got the shock of the collision.

Over he went like a ten-pin, while Nick was but little shaken.

The boy regained his feet, but, as he did so, Mrs. Connors rushed past him.

"The ghost!" she exclaimed; "it was the ghost!"

Nick recovered his wits fully. He had no fear of any ghost, but he did know that he needed to be active to get away from his human companions. Believing that the safest way of retreat was through the garret, he went that way, avoiding Connors and feeling a course along through the rubbish.

He had calculated on a window which opened upon the shed he had before used, but, considerably to his surprise, he found it boarded up and the way barred.

He was about to retreat when Bostwick's voice again rose.

"Are you there, Connors?"

"I am, that."

"Stand in the door, and don't let a soul pass. I hear somebody moving in the garret."

"I reckon there was two on 'em."

"If I catch any one, I'll break his head."

"I'll help you."

"The devils stole that package."

"I should say so."

"Did you see him?—or was it a woman?"

"I think 'twas a woman."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"I thought 'twas a man."

Bostwick's voice was uneasy and thought-

"I don't understand it," he added.

"Nor I."

"Some one was concealed in the garret."

Bostwick lowered his voice, but Nick heard the next question.

"Do you think it was a detective?"

"Blamed if I know; they say there is one here."

"I'll give the devils a lesson if they come spying around here— But, no; these folks were not that sort. We have to deal with another kind. I reckon we have one of 'em in here, and, by Judas, I am going to have it. Why don't the old woman hurry up with the lamp?"

There was one person who did not want any one to "hurry up with the lamp," and that was Nick Nettle. He was in a bad fix, and anxious to get out. If a light was produced he must surely be discovered unless he could do something before that time to get away.

He saw but one way to do this. As has before been said he knew the old house well, and he made his way to the northeast corner of the garret. Beyond this was the old squire's sleeping room. When the latter was finished off a space was partitioned off next to the wall, where the roof came down too low to make it desirable space.

Nick had been into this place once. It was a tunnel-like hole, twenty feet long and about five wide. The entrance had been boarded up, but one board had come loose, and by removing it he had gone in.

He saw little besides dust and cobwebs, but did discover that some of the outside boards at the corner of the building were almost ready to fall off.

Remembering this, he believed he now saw a way of escape.

He made his way to the entrance to the place, and, again removing the loose board, entered. Greatly to his satisfaction, he found that he could easily replace the board so that casual inspection would not show that it was loose.

This he did, and then, as voices sounded again, he paused to listen.

He had left the store-room just in time.

Bostwick, Martin and Mrs. Connors entered the garret with a fresh light.

"I don't know who it was," Bostwick was saying, in a loud voice, "but if any of the gang is left, I mean to know who he is."

"He may have a revolver," suggested Mrs. Connors, quaveringly.

"I've got one, too."

"Somebody will be killed."

"Shut up!" ordered Martin. "You're scared to death all the time. First it's ghosts, and now it's humans. Pretty woman, you be!"

"Ain't I good reason to be nervous? How can I help it when I remember the old squire? I can see the blood—"

"That'll do!" Connors hurriedly exclaimed.

"I should say so," added Bostwick. "We don't want any more of such talk. Mart, take this board for a club, and follow me up. I'll shoot anybody I find here."

The search began, but Nick did not wait to see the result of it; he was anxious to get entirely clear of Hemenway house, and he moved carefully along the passage.

He soon reached the end of it. Then he looked for the loose boards which had attracted his attention during his previous visit. Somewhat to his surprise he did not see any ray of light, but he knew about where the boards were.

He put out his hand and pressed upon them.

A feeling of disappointment followed.

No looseness was perceptible; the boards seemed firm and well nailed.

A startling suspicion swept over the boy.

Had the weak point been repaired?

If so, he was worse off than ever.

Again he made a trial, using more force, and the result confirmed his fears. There was no longer any "give" to the boards, and it was clear that they had been securely nailed since he was there before. He was firmly shut in, it seemed, and at the mercy of those he could not but regard as his enemies. Discovery was certain if they continued the search, and they would not deal lightly with any one they caught there at that time. Arrest for breaking and entering was the lightest punishment he could hope for.

Moreover, there was ground for fear that he might be served as old Squire Hemenway had been.

Bostwick's voice sounded at the partition:

"What sort of a place is this?"

"It's an empty hole, boarded off next to the eaves," Connors replied.

"Get a hammer, and we'll tear off a board."

"But how can any one be in there?"

"True; they couldn't pass the boards." Bostwick rapped on the partition. "I reckon no one is in there," he decided. "They can't be." "Then it seems no skulker is about." "Looks that way." "But I thought I heard some one in the garret." "Must 'a' been your fancy." "Possibly."

Nick was breathing more freely, and his hopes again arose. If the trio would go down-stairs, he would not be long in getting out of the house. He wished he had never entered it, though the episode of the unknown person who had snatched the package was of interest.

Suddenly Bostwick's voice arose again. "Here's the dog. Send him down-stairs; we want some one, or something, to keep intruders away while we are here. All the village folks may be in yet."

Connors essayed to obey the order, but the dog refused to obey, and, evading him, ran about the room with his nose close to the floor.

"Hold on!" added Bostwick. "He's on the scent. Let him alone, and we may learn something yet."

The dog coursed about, and if Nick Nettle had seen him he would have known that "Prince" had recognized the scent. His manner bespoke a desire to greet an old friend.

He finally stopped beside the partition, shoved his nose against it, and whined in dog-fashion.

"By Jupiter!" cried Bostwick; "there is somebody in there. I'll have those boards off, anyhow!"

Once more he thumped heavily on the partition, which so feebly guarded Nick's hiding-place.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS OLD GENTLEMAN.

THE state of affairs was fully understood by Nick Nettle. He had heard enough to know that the dog, Prince, who had always liked him well, was about to betray him through his affection. Prince was not a celebrated dog, and no other emotion would have urged him on as affection did. This was now being used in a way which would have worried Prince had he possessed reasoning powers.

"What am I to do?" Nick was thinking. "When they take down the boards I am surely in for it, and there is but one way out of here."

He looked about in desperation. He saw more at stake than his own safety. Bostwick and his tools might, or might not, do him bodily injury, but a great deal would be lost if he was discovered.

He was now more than ever convinced that these persons had killed the old squire, and, if he could keep quiet, he might secure more evidence against them as the days passed on.

"Bring a hammer and crow-bar," continued Bostwick. "We'll have them out in a jiffy."

Nick heard Connors walk heavily away.

Then it was it occurred to the boy that his time had come. Only Bostwick and Mrs. Connors were left in the garret. Was it possible to get past them before Martin returned?

He peered through a crack in the partition. Bostwick stood within two feet of it, holding the lamp in his hand.

A sudden idea occurred to Nick. The man was just back of the loose board. If Nick dashed violently against this board, it would be driven against Bostwick forcibly. Was it not likely that this would extinguish the light and give him a chance to escape?

"It's my only hope, and I'll try it!" thought Nick, and then he gathered all of his energy for the effort.

Another moment and he sprung against the board. Unsecured by even a nail, it yielded to the shock and flew out like a flash. It drove straight toward the lamp—straight toward Bostwick's face. The latter had no time to avoid it; he had no time to think. *Crash!* went his lamp, breaking into many pieces; and then over on the floor went Mr. Jason Bostwick.

The room was plunged into darkness. Mrs. Connors uttered a scream. "The ghost!" she cried, and then fled precipitately.

Nick Nettle did not wait to see how Bostwick would take it. The way of escape was open, and the boy improved his chance. He ran through the store-room, and then to the back of the house. He soon reached the same window where he had entered.

Thus far there was no pursuit. Up went the window, and Nick stepped out on

the roof off the shed. Just then Prince came bounding after him, barking loudly, but he dropped the window and the dog was baffled.

Nick ran to the lowest part of the roof and leaped to the ground. After that he had but little fear; the whole country was before him. Realizing the value of a good start, he dashed away and did not stop until he had put a good distance between him and the old house.

Then he paused in a grove and looked back. The upper part of the house was again lighted, but he saw no signs of excitement there.

Neither was there any sign of pursuit. He drew a deep breath of relief. He considered himself lucky to get clear so well—for he was next to positive that he had not been recognized.

He was considerably troubled, however. He had a clear sense of what was right and wrong, and the way he had entered the house did not satisfy him. It was an unlawful act, and he had no desire to be classed as a burglar. Such persons always end in State Prison, and he knew it.

In this case, however, he felt that the end justified the means. He had gone to gain light in the tragic case of Squire Hemenway, and as he remembered the good old man who had been cruelly slain, he was not sorry for what he had done.

"I am almost certain that those folks killed him," thought the boy. "Anyway, they are glad he is dead, and they are coarse and brutal. It will pay to watch them more. But was somebody else watching? What of the person who snatched the package and ran away?"

Here was a conundrum hard to solve. He did not even know whether it had been a man or woman. Bostwick's party differed on this point. Still, Nick was confident that it had been a man; the way in which he had been knocked over indicated a good deal of strength somewhere.

But who was this person?

What were the contents of the package?

"It's all a mystery," thought Nick. "Everything is mysterious about here now. Poor old Squire Hemenway! we little dreamed how it would end when we used to ride about together!"

The grateful-hearted boy dashed one hand across his eyes. It had been Squire Hemenway who showed him the way from darkness to light, and started him on the way to honesty and future success.

He had cause to be grateful.

A footstep startled Nick; he turned and found himself facing a man he did not recognize in the darkness.

"Good-evening, my lad!" said the stranger.

"Good-evening, sir."

"Out star-gazing?"

"No. Stars are not numerous to-night."

"True. Did you ever study astronomy?"

"No, sir."

"Great study."

"I presume so."

"You live over there, I take it."

The speaker pointed to the Hemenway house, and changed his subject very easily and neatly.

"No," replied Nick.

"No! Didn't you come from there?"

"I was only out to walk."

"Ah! Beautiful place, this town is."

"Yes, sir."

"Lovely water-lilies, out on the pond."

By this time Nick could see his companion more clearly. He seemed to be a gentleman of sixty or more years—at least, his hair and beard were white. Some of his questions rather alarmed Nick, but the old gentleman spoke of the water-lilies with reassuring simplicity.

"I am stopping at the hotel," he added, "and shall be there a few days. I'd like to hire a boy to bring me fresh lilies every day."

"I shall be glad to do it, sir."

"Consider it a bargain, then; you shall be duly paid. Did you know the late Deacon Hemenway?—or was it 'Squire,' that they called him?"

"Squire Hemenway, sir. Yes; I knew him."

"Sad about him."

"It is, indeed, sad, sir!"

Nick answered in a melancholy voice, and the old gentleman nodded twice in succession.

"I don't suppose you are the boy who used to do odd jobs for him?"

"I am that boy, sir."

"Ah! sad blow to you."

"Squire Hemenway was the best man I ever knew."

"Yes, yes. You used to ride round with him, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never saw him have trouble with any one?"

"Never."

"Tramps around here?"

"I haven't seen any lately."

"Who owns the big house now?"

"I believe his name is Bostwick."

"Didn't have many servants there, eh?"

"Only Martin Connors, his wife and a girl—her name is Ellice Cone."

"I see. Bad luck for them to lose a good master."

"Yes."

Nick was not prepared to deny anything the old gentleman said. He seemed a good-natured man, and it was natural, no doubt, that he should question Nick, as everybody else in the village did.

"No doubt Connors will take care of you now."

"No, he won't!" declared Nick.

"No? Ain't you and he friends?"

"I don't know that we are enemies."

"I see. Do they feel very badly at the house?"

"I don't know," replied Nick, less graciously than before, but the old gentleman did not seem to notice it; he switched off upon another subject in his peculiar way.

"Who did they say was Ellice Cone's lover?"

"I don't know much about that."

"No? Nobody come to see her, eh?"

"Not to my knowledge, but she has friends in the village."

"Does Connors smoke?"

Nick began to think the old gentleman crazy, but he answered politely:

"He smokes a good deal."

"Often has men in to smoke with him, eh?"

"I don't know that he ever does."

"No? Not social, I dare say?"

"Not very."

"Did you see Hemenway have much money the day before he was killed?"

"I didn't notice any money."

"Just so. Was the squire charitable—ever give to beggars or the like?"

"He gave a good deal in charity, but never to strangers. His orders were to give nothing to tramps."

"Ever see him refuse to give to a tramp?"

"Once or twice."

"Lately?"

"No; not since last spring."

"He refused then, eh? Any trouble about it? Did the tramp seem angry or make threats?"

"No. The squire said he could not do anything for him, and the man went along without a word."

"I see. No recent case, you say?"

"None that I know of."

"Do you know Connors's brother?"

"I didn't even know he had one."

"Just so. Perhaps I made a mistake. I heard a Connors mentioned—"

"There is a James Connors in town, but he is not related to Martin."

"I see—mistake of mine. It looks like rain. Shall you bring the lilies if it rains to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes; if you want them."

"I do; I like lilies. Bring them to the hotel. Ask for Mr. Crooks. I was going squirrel-hunting to-morrow, but it's rather early in the season. I don't believe squirrels will be very thick this year, for the chestnuts and acorns are scarce. Don't forget the water-lilies. Good-night!"

The old gentleman waved his hand and walked away with a peculiar, waddling motion, while Nick looked after him in utter bewilderment.

"Is he crazy, or—"

Nick suspended the mental inquiry, hesitated, and then murmured, half aloud:

"Or a detective?"

Surely, Mr. Crooks was eccentric enough to be either, but Nick did not arrive at a conclusion then. He made a fresh start as a hand was suddenly laid on his arm.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAMP AT THE WELL.

NICK turned suddenly. There was no cause for alarm, for his new companion was only a slender girl, and one well known to him, at that. It was Ellice Cone, the servant girl of Squire Hemenway's later days in the big house.

"Good-evening, Ellice," said Nick, in a tone of relief.

She was looking fixedly after the old gentleman, and did not make a direct reply.

"Who was that man?" she asked.

"His name is Crooks, he says."

"Crooks? Who is he?"

"I don't know, except that he is stopping at the hotel—at least, so he said; I never saw him before to-night."

"What kind of a looking man is he?"

"Oh! he's an old gentleman—looks to be nearly seventy. His hair and beard are wholly white, and he walks like it, too—like an old man I mean."

Ellice seemed to be disappointed.

"Have you seen any other man around here?"

"No."

"Have you just come from over there?"

She pointed to the Hemenway house.

"No," Nick readily replied, and then he more slowly added: "I don't think I shall be there any more. My work was mostly odd jobs for the squire, and they will be needed no more. Besides, I don't know that I want to work there any more."

"Nor I!" cried the girl, sharply. "I never will go into the house again if I can help it. I am going to send for my things to-morrow; I won't go after them."

"You liked the squire, too, Ellice."

"Yes, indeed I did."

"He was the best man in the world."

Nick paused, and then clinched his hands and added in a husky voice:

"I wish I could get hold of those who killed him. It was the worst crime I ever heard of. That poor old man who never harmed anybody, and who was so good to all, was struck down brutally. Heaven will punish the guilty."

Ellice shivered.

"Do you think there is a Heaven, Nick? And—and a hereafter?"

"I ain't a doubt of it," the boy replied. "Some folks say not, but they are blind, or try to be. Does chance move and keep this world? Not much! The scoffers object to the miracle, but what are they compared with the making of this great world? That is a miracle no one can deny."

Ellice wrung her hands.

"I wish there was no hereafter!" she exclaimed. "I wish we were like horses and cattle—all through with everything when we die."

Nick looked at her in surprise. Her emotion was singular and puzzling, yet something he had said had caused it. He had not intended to present a point in religion, for he knew next to nothing about that, having never been instructed; but he had simply expressed certain things which, to his logical mind, seemed undeniable.

Something about his ideas had evidently troubled her. He stood meditating on this fact, while she continued:

"There is nothing but suffering for us."

"You are nervous and upset, Ellice. I reckon the squire's death has done it."

"Done what?" she asked, with a start.

"Made you nervous."

"It has—it has! I haven't slept hardly at all since then. I seem to see him, and—and—"

"Ellice, who do you think could have done it?"

"Don't ask me, I don't know. I don't want to think of it—nor talk of it. He was always good to me, and nobody feels worse now than I do. I'm going now, Nick—good-night!"

Turning abruptly away, the girl hastened across the field in the direction of her house.

"All broke up," murmured Nick. "I don't know that I wonder at it. I feel that way, myself, but, of course, boys haven't nerves, like girls have."

With this sage remark, Nick, too, moved away. His course, in order to reach the village, took him near the Hemenway house, and he was not disposed to make a *detour*. Instead, he went on boldly, but quietly, watching well as he did so. There was no longer a light in the upper part of the house, but it showed from the kitchen, and it was plain that Bostwick and his associates had descended.

Whether they had given up hope of solving the mysteries of the evening was another question. No doubt, they had a good deal to perplex and worry them. There was a double mystery connected with himself and the other person who had been in the garret, and the loss of the package might mean a good deal.

Nick's mind was almost wholly on this as he went on, and he failed to realize that he was approaching the old-fashioned well that supplied water to the house until he nearly run upon it.

Then he paused and looked—an' found that he was not alone.

A man stood by the well, drinking-cup in hand.

"Hallo, youngster!" said the person, bluffly.

Nick looked at him and saw another stranger. The boy returned the greeting slowly.

"Fine water, this," pursued the unknown.

"Yes, sir."

"I like these old-fashioned wells. No modern humbuggery about them; hard to work, perhaps, with such a ponderous sweep, but when you get the water, it's cool and pure. I like old-fashioned things, myself."

Nick smiled. He had been "sizing up" the bluff, hearty-voiced speaker, and as he saw his shabby clothes and general air of dilapidation, he mentally set him down as a tramp. Such a man certainly ought to have the privilege of liking "old-fashioned things."

"It is a good well," he answered.

"You live over there, I suppose."

The man pointed to the Hemenway house.

"No, I don't."

"No? I thought, maybe, you did. I believe it was there that the man was killed?"

"Yes."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know."

"It was a bad go, but such things will happen. In the midst of life we are in death, or words to that effect. Are you going? Well, good-night."

Nick had not given any evidence that he was "going," but the man tipped up the cup and appeared to drink the last of the water, and seemed to consider the interview ended.

As Nick was not in love with the tramp order, he was willing that it should be so. He walked on, and soon put a group of rose-bushes between him and the well. There he paused, however. He had some curiosity in regard to the tramp, and wanted to see what the man would do next.

The latter appeared to be in no hurry. He lingered at the well, although he seemed to have satisfied his thirst. Nick noticed that he was gazing after him, and suspected that the tramp was curious. Thanks to the darkness and the rose-bushes, the man could tell but little as to Nick's whereabouts.

The boy kept his place and watched sharply.

If there was anything of interest to be seen he wanted to see it. The events of the evening had been so strange that he was quick to suspect a secret now.

Finally the tramp seemed satisfied, and looked after his late companion no more. He bent over the well. This, as has been said, was of old style, the water being raised by means of a "sweep." The top of the well was a wooden box two feet high, with a close-fitting cover, hung on hinges, which had to be raised when water was drawn.

The cover had been up when Nick passed, and the tramp had not lowered it. He now bent over the box, and his head and shoulders disappeared inside.

Nick watched in growing wonder. What was the man doing there? Except for the purpose for which it was made, the well possessed no interest to any one, as far as he knew.

At least two minutes passed, and then the tramp moved around one-fourth of the way and again bent over. Then followed another pause.

"He's looking for something," thought Nick. "What can it be? Nothing of value was ever there, unless he put it there himself—and I don't believe he has anything of value. It may be valuable to him, though, if it don't amount to anything."

That the matter was one which interested the tramp was very plain, for he kept to work at least ten minutes. By that time he had entirely made the circuit of the well, and Nick had no doubt that he was hunting for something which he believed was there, but which he failed to find.

What was it?

Nick Nettle's mind, wrought to the point where even trifles made an impression upon it, did not fail to take cognizance of certain facts.

This was the well of the Hemenway house, and only a few rods from where the old squire had met his death. Why was this tramp searching the place at such an hour?

If anybody had told Nick at that moment that Squire Hemenway's murderer was before him, he would not have been surprised. For the time he forgot Bostwick and Connors, and thought only of this singular, skulking, suspicious tramp.

"He's going away, now," suddenly muttered the boy. "It's my duty to find out who he is, and I'll try it. It's so late that most of the village folks are abed—besides, I haven't time to call them. I must do the work alone."

The tramp suddenly left the well and came straight toward the rose-bushes. Nick Nettle gave a perceptible start. Had he been discovered?

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERY OF THE OLD WELL.

THE suspense was soon over. The tramp passed close to the rose-bushes, but did not once glance toward the small form which huddled close up to them. On the contrary, the man went past at a rapid, swinging pace, not once looking around, but muttering angrily to himself.

Of what he said Nick caught but one sentence. "It is strange!"—that much he heard plainly, and he knew that the tramp was very angry about something.

It was not a promising mood in which to have a followed man, but Nick did not waver in his determination to know more about him. It was a great risk, for tramps are supposed to be desperate men, but Nick was not lacking in courage.

The boy had built up a theory while he crouched behind the rose-bushes. He remembered Crooks, the old gentleman to whom he was to bring the water-lilies, and his vague idea that the man might be a detective.

Crooks had in some way mentioned tramps; Nick did not then recollect just how; but it was enough to connect with the case. Perhaps he was a detective; perhaps he knew that the old squire had been killed by a tramp; and, perhaps, this tramp was the man who did the dark deed.

"If he is, and he catches me, he'll kill me, too, but I won't back out!"

With this brave thought Nick went on as skillfully as he could. The man had struck off across the field, and as the young pursuer knew every step of the way well, he was able to shield himself from pursuit to a great extent.

An occasional tree, or group of bushes, of which there were several, served him well.

Possibly all this care was thrown away, for Nick did not once see the tramp look around.

One-fourth of a mile from the Hemenway house was a wood which covered about twenty acres, and was owned by a man named Stearns. Straight toward this went the pursued man, and, once at the edge, he marched into the bushes with crashing feet.

Nick hastened after he reached the bushes, and then paused to listen.

He could hear no unusual sound. The heavy steps of the tramp had ceased, and only the rustling of the leaves broke the silence.

"I'm seen, and he is waiting to catch me!" thought the boy, with some natural trepidation.

He crouched lower and waited anxiously, prepared to flee at a moment's warning, but no alarm came; the moments glided past, and the silence remained unbroken.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes passed. By that time Nick was more perplexed than ever, but his mood had grown to be a more daring one. If the tramp was hiding near at hand he was going to know it.

Arising, he moved boldly forward. Secrecy would have done no good; if the tramp was hiding near at hand he was sure to hear him, anyway. So in went Nick with considerable noise. He felt almost certain that he could go direct to where the man was, but, lo! when he arrived there, no man was there.

He paused and listened. All was silent.

He thought for a moment, and then took from his pocket a newspaper and some matches. Using these he soon had a light, and with this he made a quick examination. Before the light gave out he had satisfied himself that the tramp was not within several yards of him, and he was obliged to admit the truth.

He had lost the man!

"He knew I was following him, and outwitted me somehow—I don't know how. Either he was sharp or I am very dull; he stole away, and may now be half a mile off."

Nick turned back in disgust. It would be folly to pursue his search further, and he knew it.

"I'll go home and go to bed," he decided.

And he carried out this idea, but it was long before he slept. Thoughts of the tramp, the old gentleman, Bostwick and Connors filled his mind, to the exclusion of sleep; and even when slumber came his rest was disturbed by strange visions of scenes in the Hemenway garret and around the old well.

Nick arose at an early hour the next morning. There was nothing for him to do at home except to eat his breakfast—and the size of the breakfast made this easy—and then he wandered away.

It was a question in his mind whether or not he ought to tell Lovering, the deputy-sheriff,

what he had seen the previous night. At first he was strongly of the opinion that it was duty to tell all, but, as he considered the matter more, he was not so sure.

Of what would his evidence consist? Vague suspicions, and nothing more. No one thing pointed directly to the Hemenway tragedy—and if he made the statement, he must confess that he had entered the old house unlawfully.

Such being the case, he decided to keep his information awhile, anyhow.

He moved toward the village to get the latest news. His course took him near Hemenway's, and he was eying the house narrowly when he ran upon a boy of his own age.

Tommy Flynn, the boy was called. He was a bright-faced Irish lad, and had always been Nick's friend. Poverty made a bond between them.

Tommy greeted Nick, and then added the inquiry:

"Going ter de village?"

"Yes," Nick replied.

"Is dere any news?"

"I don't know of any."

"Phat do ye think ave it, anyhow?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Ye ought ter be interested, the ould squire did so much fur yez."

"I am interested," Nick earnestly replied.

"So be I. Look here, Nick, I've got somethin' ter tell you," suddenly added Tommy.

"What is it?"

"You see de old well, over there?"

Tommy pointed to this feature of the Hemenway homestead, and as the well was only a few rods away, Nick's reply was, naturally, in the affirmative.

"Wal, I've found somethin' there," Tommy added.

"What?"

"Come over to de well."

Nick glanced at the house. Smoke was curling lazily from the chimney, and as the garden shrubbery intervened between the house and well, it was not likely they would be seen. The Connors and Bostwick were invisible. So they went to the well, and Tommy lifted the cover.

"D'ye see dat flat stone there?" pointing to one of the coping flags.

"Yes."

"Lean over an' put yer hand under it, an see phat a nice little niche dere is."

"Nick obeyed, and found it as his companion had said.

"Foine hidin'-place, ain't it?"

"Yes," again answered Nick, looking at Tommy with growing interest.

"Wal, I found somethin' thar. Look here!"

Tommy cast a cautious glance around, and then drew an object out of his pocket and held it up for Nick's inspection.

"I found dis in de old well!" the Irish boy declared.

It was a long-bladed butcher-knife. Nick gazed at it with expanded eyes. He remembered the tramp and his unavailing search in the well for something he did not find; he remembered his suspicion that the tramp had been concerned in the killing of old Squire Hemenway. And now this ugly-looking knife appeared on the scene!

"You found *that* in the well?" he mechanically returned.

"I did, dat."

"How came it there?"

"Just phat I want ter know," answered Tommy, with another cautious glance around them. "I come here yisterday ter git some water, an' me hat nearly fell into de well. It lodged on dat stone inside, an' it was whin I was gettin' it out dat I found de knife tucked n'ately under de stone."

"It can't have been there long; there is no rust on it."

"Just so. It can't have been there long. I wouldn't be afeerd ter bet somethin' it wa'n't dere before de ould Squire was killed."

"And he was killed with a knife."

"Yes."

The boys looked at each other in momentary silence. They could not fail to understand each other, and their suspicions were startling. There was the old well only a few rods from the Hemenway house, and in it had been found the knife. That any ordinary motive had led to its being placed under the flat stone did not seem at all likely. Certainly, Nick thought, the tramp would not have put it there from any such motive; if his, it had been too valuable to leave around, unless it was dangerous to carry it.

"Let me look at it," continued Nick.

He took the knife and examined it carefully.

His object was to see if there were any blood-stains upon it, but even the place where the blade and handle were connected failed to reveal any such tell-tale signs to him.

"The question now is," pursued Nick; "is this knife connected with the tragedy of the big house? Did it kill Squire Hemenway? There is a mystery about the matter which must be cleared up. It was not put here for nothing; somebody was afraid to keep it in his possession. But why? Did the person who killed the old squire hide this knife in the well? I must say that it looks very much like it."

CHAPTER VII.

KING HUGHES.

TOMMY FLYNN nodded quickly.

"Just me own idea," he agreed.

"What are you going to do with tke knife?"

"There is only one thing to do—give it to Sheriff Lovering."

"Then he'll git all de glory."

"That's a fact, but your duty is clear."

"Thin I'll do me duty," Tommy answered, "but I'd sort o' like ter folly up de case."

"We can do so."

"How?"

"Suppose you and I turn detectives, and look around a bit? We may find out more than Lovering."

"Begorra, I'll be wid yez!" cried Tommy, his face beaming with pleasure. "I'd like ter git some glory, mesilf, an' now is de toime ter do it."

"I don't think of the glory," soberly answered Nick Nettle, "but the squire was such a good friend to me that I want to see him avenged. The law calls for all such villains, and it ought to have them."

"It shall, ef we kin do it. Say, Nick, do ye think Connors did de job?"

"Wait awhile, we'll talk of this later. The first thing for us to do is to take these things to Lovering."

Nick lowered the cover to the well. The place had become more than ever one of mystery. Once, Nick had thought it a very pleasant place, and had liked to quaff the cold water, while the old-fashioned arrangement for drawing it had pleased him, but it now had a mystery connected with it, and he felt glad to get away.

They went at once to Sheriff Lovering's.

The latter had an office in the village, and the door was usually unfastened when he was in, but such was not the case on this occasion. They found it locked, and thought that he was not there, but, before they could go away, he turned the key and opened the door.

When they said that they had something to tell he asked them in, and the story was soon told. Nick produced the knife, and the deputy-sheriff examined it narrowly. He gave them no clew, however, to his thoughts until he observed:

"The knife may have been in the well a year."

"I don't think so, sir," replied Nick.

"Why not?"

"In that case there would be rust on the blade."

"There is something in that."

"Do ye think Squire Hemenway was killed wid it, Misher Sheriff?" boldly asked Tommy.

"There is no evidence to that effect."

"Thin you'll let us k'ape de knife, I s'pose?"

Lovering looked up, met Tommy's fixed gaze and smiled.

"You are rather a shrewd young fellow," he observed. "I see you are putting me to the test. Well, under the circumstances, I can do no more than to keep the knife, myself. I'll do so, and I want a promise from you boys."

"Phat's that?"

"That you will not mention this matter to any living person."

Lovering spoke with emphasis, and looked sharply at the boys as he did so. It was clear that he was decidedly in earnest in making the request. Both Nick and Tommy gave the desired promise. Nick had been thinking about another matter on the way to the office, and had decided that the sheriff ought to know about the tramp who had been searching for something in the well.

He told of this fully, but did not mention that he had been in the Hemenway house, nor any of the events which occurred there.

Lovering knit his brows into a scowl.

"I don't see anything in the tramp theory," he replied, "for the fellow probably had no object there. However, we'll look into it. I wish you to remain silent about the tramp, the same as to the knife."

Nick was disappointed in having his theory thus received, but, as he had merely mentioned it as a matter of duty, he did not try to convince the sheriff.

The latter intimated that the interview was over, and the boys went out.

"Wal," quoth Tommy, "we don't s'ame to 'ave made any great impression."

"Why not?"

"Why, he didn't see nothin' in de tramp eypsod, an' he didn't s'ame much impressed by de knife."

"I've got a theory, Tommy."

"Anither? Wal, phat is it?"

"I believe the sheriff was more impressed than he let us know."

"How so?"

"You remember he had his office-door locked."

"Yis."

"That struck me as odd, and while we were in there I thought I heard some one moving in the rear room. Now, I'll bet something he had an officer, or somebody else, in there. He didn't show his full hand to us, the sheriff didn't; and if he kept back one thing, why not another? He cautioned us strongly not to mention the knife or the tramp, and he had some motive for it. It is my opinion he thought more of our stories than he would admit, but he didn't want to trust two boys."

"Begorra! he moight do worse!" exclaimed Tommy, with a grimace. "'Cause he wasn't fit ter k'ape a saycret when he's a b'ye is no sign we're that way."

"He did what any man would have done, I guess."

"Men ain't so wise as they might be," commented Tommy, with a humorous air.

"We've done our duty, anyhow."

"D'ye s'pose we'll git credit for it, ef dey ketches de criminals?"

"I think so, but we may yet have more claims on them. Suppose we go over in the wood and see if we can get any trace of my tramp, who disappeared so strangely?"

"Done!"

Tommy agreed quickly. He was a wide-awake lad, and the prospect of any excitement out of the case just suited him. They started through the village, but were not destined to finish their journey without the excitement which young Flynn desired.

They were passing the house of a man named Anson Willis, and everything was very quiet, but suddenly the door opened and a man came out. He did not come in the ordinary way—instead, his movements were headlong, and he had barely touched the ground when he went down in a heap.

Both Nick and Tommy had seen the cause of his sudden movements; they had seen human hands accelerating his egress; and in a moment more the angry face of Mr. Willis appeared in the doorway.

The man on the ground they also recognized. He was named King Hughes, and was a young fellow of the village.

He hastily regained his feet, and it was plain to be seen that he was under the influence of liquor.

"Be off with you now!" ordered Willis, with angry emphasis.

"Be off?" shouted Hughes. "No, I won't; not much! I'll give you a thrashing before I go!"

He put his foot on the first step, but Willis spoke in a voice so firm as to make him pause.

"Stop, King Hughes! You want to think twice before you do anything more. Don't get yourself into trouble. Your father was my friend, and I don't want to harm his son. For his sake I've borne with you until forbearance is a crime. You have gone to the end of your rope, and I forbid you ever to enter my house again, but I do not want to make trouble for you. Keep away—go now—and there need be no trouble."

Hughes balanced himself unsteadily, and looked angrily at Willis.

"So you forbid me your house, eh?"

"I do."

"I don't want to see you, anyhow."

"You can see no one here."

"Not even Martha?"

"Not even Martha."

"I'd like to know if she ain't old enough to choose for herself?"

"If she is, her choice is that you keep away. She has only tolerated your presence because I clung to you for your father's sake, and hoped to reform you."

"You're a fine reformer!" sneered Hughes.

"I no longer think of trying to reform you," Willis answered, gravely.

"Better reform yourself, first."

"And you," replied Willis, "had better go away."

He glanced at Nick Nettle and Tommy. Thus far, the quarrel had drawn no other witnesses. The situation of the house was favorable for secrecy, and a crowd was slow to gather in that quiet village.

"I want you to know," persisted Hughes, "that now you have broken with me you can't palm off Martha any longer as your daughter."

Willis changed expression perceptibly.

"You don't know what you are talking about," he said, nervously.

"I do know, and I'll prove it. You and my old man thought you were going to keep the thing mighty sly, but young heads have ears. I know your secret."

"There is no secret."

"You lie, and you know it. Martha ain't your girl."

"Nonsense!"

"Keep it up, if you want to, but if you don't come down off your high horse, the whole town shall know the truth. Martha ain't your daughter. Whose is she?"

"That is none of your business, King Hughes."

"I'll make it my business if you don't take me in. Perhaps I talked rather 'sassy' to you today, but I had a 'jag' on, and I didn't know what I said. I'm sorry. But I won't be bulldozed. Give me another show, or I'll go and tell the whole village that Martha ain't your girl, but that she's Nobody's girl!"

Willis uttered a startled exclamation, but it was not caused by what Hughes said. The words had fallen on other ears than his.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FINGER OF SUSPICION.

DOWN the street had come two young ladies. Nick Nettle noticed them vaguely. One was Martha Willis, the subject of this conversation, while the other was Ellice Cone. The boy was rather surprised to see them together, for they were in no sense of the word associates, and he knew that a complicated scene must follow.

Martha was the girl of whom King Hughes was talking so freely, while he and Ellice were supposed to be engaged lovers.

Mr. Willis had hoped to quiet Hughes and prevent his unpleasant talk from going abroad, but the sudden appearance of Martha and her companion had destroyed this hope.

Martha came just in time to overhear Hughes's closing declaration, and it brought her to a sudden stop. Then followed a tableau. Martha looked perplexed and startled; Willis was alarmed; Ellice looked at Hughes in a strange way; and the latter stared from one to another of the party with a dazed expression due to the liquor he had drunk.

It now became the desire of Mr. Willis to get Martha beyond hearing, and his haste led him to adopt an unfortunate choice of words.

"Be so good as to go in at once, Martha. King is not in condition to talk."

"Ain't I?" retorted the young rough, growing very angry again. "You shall see. My tongue is in condition for wagging, and it's going to wag. Now, then, old gent, do you forgive me, or shall I tell Martha all that I know?"

Martha moved quickly forward.

"It is very clear to me, sir, that you are not in condition to tell me anything, though about as you usually are. As for what you said, I heard it all. I will trouble my father to explain, not you."

She started past him, but his voice arose angrily.

"If you won't hear it, there are those who will; I'll spread it all over the village. Old Willis ain't your father, and it'll bother you to prove that you ever had one, I reckon."

"Villain, you speak falsely!" cried Mr. Willis.

"All right; go it, old gent. I can do the same. I'll make music for you."

"And I," declared Willis, "will make your dark record known to all, if you annoy me. I have shielded you, because you are your father's son, but I am done. I'll tell all that I know about you."

"I defy you—"

Hughes began the sentence belligerently, but a hand was laid upon his arm and he came to a stop. He turned and saw Ellice Cone. She had glided to his side, and her face was so pale and startled as to check the vehement words on his tongue.

She whispered something which was audible only to him, and his confident manner suddenly vanished. His head dropped, and he looked around as though frightened.

The change in his manner was so complete and sudden that both Willis and Martha stood gazing at him forgetful of their own affairs, but Ellice forgot nothing. She clung to his arm, and again whispered to him. This time her words seemed to have even more effect, and, as she pulled at his arm, he turned away from the house as though he had utterly forgotten the other persons.

Then he and Ellice went down the street side by side, his manner grown as meek as that of a lamb.

Willis watched them a moment in perplexity; then glanced at Nick and Tommy; then turned to Martha.

"Come in, dear," he said, gently.

The girl looked at him with a strange, earnest expression on her face. Young as Nick Nettle was, he did not fail to read that look. The words of King Hughes—the assertion that she was not Willis's daughter—had sunk deep into her heart. It is the way of a girl to cling closely to her parents, and Martha had received a severe blow.

Strange as it seemed, she might not be Anson Willis's daughter.

She went in without a word, however, and Nick and Tommy were left alone when the door closed.

"Wal, how's that?" cried young Flynn.

"I guess so."

"Guess what?"

"Oh! I didn't notice what you said."

"I should say not. King Hughes kicked up quite a rumpus, but Ellice managed him all right. More fool she, ef she cares for him. She ain't a bad sort, an' Hughes is a miserable drunkard. Tell ye what, Nick, that feller'll bring up in State Prison."

"Or worse."

"Mebbe he will."

Half unconsciously to Nick, the boys had left the road and were starting for the wood where he had seen the tramp. Nick was in deep study, and it was not until he had given Tommy another vague reply that he was aroused.

"Phat's the matter wid yez?" cried Tommy.

Nick stopped short and faced his companion.

"Did it strike you that the way King and Ellice acted was queer?"

"Why, ave coorse; but dey are sw'ate on aich other, ye know."

"What did she whisper to him?"

"Dunno, by gracious."

"Tommy, do you remember the time down at the hotel when Hughes was drunk, and had a knife?"

"I do, that; an ugly-lookin' thing it was, too, an' he threatened ter use it on de first man who touched him."

"And do you remember the knife you found in the old well?"

Tommy started, and then looked fixedly at Nick. He shook his head.

"You're gettin' rayther deep, Nick," he answered.

"Hear the rest. Last night I met Ellice Cone. She was out looking for some man—who, I don't know—but as I recall what she said, it seems strange. She was nervous and excited, and when I spoke of the big house she said she was done there, and never wanted to go inside the place again; and then she said she hadn't slept hardly at all since the old squire was killed, and that she seemed to see him. Now why was she so badly broke up?"

"I see what ye are drivin' at," slowly answered Tommy. "King Hughes had a knife, and had threatened folks wid it; I found a knife in the old well, an' the squire was killed wid a knife. You think Hughes killed him, an' Ellice Cone knows it."

"That is my idea."

"A bit ago ye suspected an unknown tramp."

"Yes."

"Kinder mixed up, ain't yez?"

Nick Nettle did not answer. A short time before he met the tramp he had been almost sure that Squire Hemenway had been killed by Jason Bostwick and Martin Connors.

He was even more inconsistent than Tommy knew.

"I think King Hughes is bad enough for it," added Flynn, after a pause.

"I tell you, Tommy, Ellice is terribly nervous about something, and she has reason for it. Worthless fellow that King Hughes is, she likes him as well as a woman can, and it looks bad to me. What did she whisper to King that scared him, and took all the fight out of him?"

Tommy shook his head.

"You may be roight," he admitted.

"See here, Tommy, do you know an old gentleman at the hotel, named Crooks?"

"I've see'd him."

"How long has he been there?"

"Two days, I bel'ave."

"Come since the squire was killed?"

"Yis."

"What is he?"

"I haven't an idee."

"Tommy, I believe he is a detective!"

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Why do ye think so?"

"Well, I met Crooks last night, and we had quite a talk—a very funny talk, too. He is a queer man, to say the least; the way he changed around from one subject to another was very odd; and he mixed the murder up with talk about pond-lilies, squirrels, the stars, and so on. I never saw such a queer man before, but he asked some questions about the murder which were right to the point, and I got the idea that he was a detective. Now, it has just occurred to me that he asked who Ellice Cone's lover was."

"He did? Phat did ye tell him?"

"I sort of evaded the point; I didn't mention Hughes, for I thought I wouldn't tell Ellice's private affairs; but now that I suspect King, it looks odd. If Crooks is a detective, I'll bet that he suspects King Hughes, too."

"But, see here, Nick, why should Hughes kill the old squire, anyhow?"

"A vicious-minded person will do anything."

"In this case dere must 'a' been a motive, an' I can't see none. Whoever went inter de squire's house, an' killed him, had a motive for goin' in. Now, King Hughes ain't poor—he hadn't any need o' bein' a burglar—so why should he be in de house, at all?"

"You forget that Ellice lived there."

"So I did, fur a second."

"He may have gone to see her, and had some trouble with the squire."

"That's a fack."

"However it was, we'll look into it and see if we can get any light. You know we have decided to go into the case as detectives."

"True fur yez, an' here we be at Stearns's Wood, ter begin."

They have reached the point where Nick had lost the tramp the previous night. They did not expect any great discoveries, but Nick was curious to know how the tramp had evaded him, and as the soil was favorable for trailing, he proposed to try.

He located the spot where the tramp had entered the bushes without trouble.

"Now, look sharp," he said to Tommy, "and we will see if we were born for trailers."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERY OF THE HOLLOW TREE.

THE boys proceeded slowly and systematically. Nick Nettle felt that haste might ruin all, so he took care to keep his more impulsive companion back.

It was not hard to find the trail the tramp had left on entering the wood. Some of his footprints were invisible, but enough of them stood out clearly so that they were not troubled.

For about sixty feet the trail led away in a direct line—then, when they looked for more tracks, in a due line, they could find none.

It was Nick who first suspected the cause of this, and, without mentioning his idea to young Flynn, he turned to the right. Here he at once met with success, and the stratagem of the tramp became plain. The wily fellow had doubled on his own trail, and as Nick went on he was led back to the field which bordered the wood.

Then he knew how the tramp had managed to get away without noise. He had returned to the field, where, of course, the soft grass made no betraying noise when he hastened away.

Nick stopped. He had no thought of following the trail further; he was not skillful enough to trace the tramp's course under such conditions. But he was more than ever interested. It was clear that the man had known that he was followed, and, instead of betraying the fact, he had used his wits and escaped in a way which showed that he was possessed of no mean degree of shrewdness.

"I am doubly beaten, sure enough," thought Nick, reluctantly. "He outwitted me last night, and now I have no clew to him."

Just then Tommy Flynn's voice arose.

"Nick!" he cried.

"What is it?"

"Come here!"

Nick obeyed. He re-entered the bushes, and

found his young friend standing beside a tall, rough old tree, holding something in his hand which looked like a man's coat.

"See what I've got," Tommy added.

"What is it?"

"Just what I want ter know."

"Where did you get it?"

"Found de thing in this tree. You see there is a bit ave a holler in dar."

Tommy seemed more excited than the mere discovery of the coat need make him, and he handed the garment to Nick with a very grave expression on his face.

"See ef you kin discover anyt'ing queer about it," he added.

Nick Nettle took the coat, and almost at the first glance he discovered something "queer." The sleeves and the front of the coat were spotted with dark, irregular stains of some sort—what they were he could not tell; but his imagination was so active at that particular time he looked quickly up at Tommy.

"Do you mean these spots?" he asked.

"Yis."

"What are they?"

"Jist phat I want you ter say," Tommy replied.

Nick turned the garment over and examined it carefully, while a new expression came to his face.

"Tommy, I recognize this coat."

"Ye do? Whose is it?"

Nick fixed his gaze significantly upon Flynn's face.

"It is Martin Connors's."

"It is?"

"Yes."

"Martin's coat stuck away in dat tree, an' all spotted wid—wai, wid what?"

The boys looked at each other fixedly. The same idea was in the mind of each, but they hesitated to express it. The dark stains exercised a good deal of influence upon them.

"There is no use of mincing matters," said Nick, at length. "Unless all signs go for nothing, these spots are blood!"

"True fur yez. We can't swear to it, but thar don't seem no room fur doubt. They're blood, an' that's a fact. Wal, whose blood?"

Nick shook his head.

"It isn't any chance that a coat I have often seer Martin Connors wear is stuffed into this tree, with blood-stains on it. It hasn't been here a great while, if I am any judge, and we are brought right to the tragedy of the big house again. I feel almost sure that the man who murdered the old squire wore this coat when he did the deed; that it became so spotted with blood that he dared not have it around; and that he brought it here and hid it in the hollow of the tree."

"That's logic."

"We have found another clew. From the hour that the coroner's jury brought in their verdict that the squire had been killed by persons unknown to them, I have had a great desire to be a Nemesis to the guilty ones, and it almost seems that we are destined to be so."

"Phat d'ye m'ane by Nemesis?" asked Tommy.

"Nemesis was the goddess of retribution, and, when we call a person a 'Nemesis,' we mean that that person is doing that kind of work."

"Just so; but, see here, Nick! Who does dis coat seem ter implicate?"

"Martin Connors."

"Wal, ain't we gittin' deeper an' deeper into de mire? First it was de tramp who did it, den King Hughes, an' now it's Connors. Mixed, ain't it?"

"I don't see clearly," Nick Nettle thoughtfully admitted. "In spite of all we have discovered, I can't say that I know who killed the poor old squire."

"Wal, I reckon it was somebody who wore Martin's coat."

"And who should wear it but Martin Connors?"

"Dat's logic."

"All of these men I have at times suspected can't be guilty," Nick pursued. "Such a combination as Connors, Hughes and the tramp to do the murder is not to be thought of. Now, which of the three had the most reason to do it? Hughes was only a little acquainted with the squire, and, though he often met Ellice just outside the house, I don't know that he ever went in. Ellice had a good place at the big house; she lost, rather than gained, by the murder. The tramp we can't size up exactly. He may have entered the house on the sly to rob it, and so have killed the squire—"

"But ef he did it, why is he still hangin' 'round here, riskin' arrest!"

"Just what I was going to ask, Tommy."

"S'pose we consider Connors."

"We will. He worked for the squire, and had a good place, but I know he was not satisfied. He was a surly, fault-finding, avaricious fellow, and he wanted the whole earth, as the expression is. He and Jason Bostwick were great friends, and Jason played on his weaknesses, and bound him to him tight as a burr. If Connors would not gain by the squire's death, he undoubtedly *thought* he would gain greatly."

"Begorra, ye put it loike a lawyer!" cried Flynn, admiringly.

"I'm interested enough to *think* on the subject," Nick answered, gravely.

"An' ye do it wal. Me friend, I'm more o' the opinion Martin Connors did it, than anybody else. Ef he didn't, how came his coat stained with blood?"

"Is it blood?"

"I ain't a doubt on't."

"But see here, Tommy. If the knife we found was the one the old squire was killed with, why did the guilty person hide the knife in the well, and the coat here? Why not put both in the same place?"

Young Flynn scratched his head dubiously.

"I reckon we've got ter throw out the knife," he replied, presently.

"Maybe it had nothing to do with the murder."

"I believe 'twas King Hughes's knife, though. The more I think over it, de more it looks like de wan we saw King flourishin' de night he was 'full.' Now, I'd like ter know how his knife came hid in de well."

"And I," added Nick, "would like to know why the tramp was searching in the well."

"It's awfully mixed up, begorra," Tommy returned. "Looks like we would have our hands full ter solve de mystery, but ef you say go on, I'm wid you to the end."

"I do say so. Perhaps our help isn't needed, but if we use any kind of judgment, we can't do any harm. Now, let's look this coat over."

They did so, making a thorough examination, but nothing came of it. The pockets contained nothing whatever except a few small pieces of tobacco, which had apparently accumulated from time to time. The substance of the coat was coarse and heavy—singularly heavy for summer wear—and, though not ragged, it was considerably worn. It showed evidence of having been used in farm-labor, and Nick was positive that it was that of Martin Connors.

The place where it had been hidden was well adapted to that use, and as it had evidently been filled in with pieces of half-decayed wood, such as are often seen in a cavity of a tree, Tommy would not have seen it but for a trifling circumstance.

The hollow tree was the home of one or more squirrels, and when the hider of the coat blocked up the road, the four-footed dweller, or dwellers, had promptly opened it again. Much of the decayed wood had been dislodged, and the coat made visible.

Nick and Tommy now had another point to consider. Should they carry the coat to Sheriff Lovering at once? Tommy stoutly opposed the idea. He declared they had not received due notice, and courtesy, on their former visit, and, as he still thirsted for "glory," he was strongly in favor of keeping the coat back.

Nick at first took the opposite side of the question, but Tommy's persistence led to a compromise. They decided to hide the coat in Tommy's house and wait two days before taking decisive action.

At the end of that time, they would again consult.

CHAPTER X.

A NIGHT-SCENE BY THE OLD WELL.

The day was at an end. Nick Nettle and his young friend had made no new discoveries, but the coat with the suggestive stains was safely stowed away at Flynn's. Nick would not have thought of taking it to his home.

As has before been said, the boy's position there was not a pleasant one. It had not been pleasant since his mother died, and his father took a second wife. In a general way the old fish-peddler was a well-meaning man, but he was indifferent, and could not understand any one who had a nature more elevated and sensitive than his.

He did not understand Nicholas, and gave the boy little more attention than he did the house-cat. He did not intend to misuse either, but he rarely took notice of them.

Mrs. Hunter was not inclined that way. She gave Nick altogether too much attention, and always to his discomfort. There was no limit

to her fault-finding, and, though he was now so large that she did not venture to abuse him in any other way, her tongue was always steeped in venom for his use—and abuse.

She had no children of her own, and, consequently, had ample time to devote to her theory of how a step-mother should conduct herself.

It was not Nick's fault that he passed nearly all his time away from the house. He could find more pleasant scenes elsewhere. He did find them, and, as he chose wisely, they did much toward training his nature in the way of honor and future usefulness.

When evening came, on the day last mentioned, Nick put on his hat and left the house. His father did not notice his departure. His step-mother did, and sent a vicious remark after him, but the boy ignored it, and walked quietly away.

First of all, he went toward the deputy-sheriff's office. Just why he did so he did not know, except that he was curious to know what Lovering and his associates were doing.

When he arrived he found the office perfectly dark, but a light shone from the window of the back room before referred to, and, though the curtain was down at the window he could see the shadow of at least two heads upon it, while fleeting shadows of another shape told of emphatic gestures with hands and arms.

What did it mean?

He knew that while the office was well-furnished and cosey, the back room was only a store-room for coal and various other unsightly articles used about the place.

Nick was not long in arriving at a conclusion. An animated conversation was going on, and it was being conducted in the rear room because there was far less danger of its being overheard by listeners.

"Something's up," soliloquized Nick. "They're in dead earnest, an' I reckon they've got some pretty positive ideas. Maybe Tommy Flynn and I will get left in 'our work.'"

He walked over to the hotel. A group of villagers stood upon the piazza, and all were talking of the great murder case. All were greatly excited. It was believed that an arrest was soon to be made, and no one professed to know where the lightning would strike. It was said that the sheriff had two city detectives with him, and—well, a good many wild sayings were mixed up with the plausible ones.

Nick Nettle listened for some time, and then walked away.

He did not believe that one of the villagers knew as much about the case as he did—and in his opinion the guilt might lie in one of several places.

As he went he saw Mr. Crooks, the old gentleman who wanted water-lilies, sitting at an upper window of the hotel. Nick and Tommy had brought around his lilies, but he had not come down. He had had the lilies sent up, and had paid liberally for them.

Nick had an idea when he saw the old gentleman at the window. He was where he could overhear much of the conversation below, and, also, watch the street.

"He's a detective, and he's attending right to a certain line of business!" thought the boy.

The latter did not pause to watch further. The town was in an excited condition, like a volcano before an eruption, and Nick felt oppressed and ill at ease. He wandered away, wishing Tommy was with him, and thus gained a position where, looking up the hill, he saw the big, old Hemenway house, resting grimly in its place.

He paused, hesitated, and then moved toward it—the place seemed to possess magnetic power over him.

The line of his advance brought him near the old well, but as he advanced closer he saw some one standing by it. Once more he availed himself of the cover of the rose-bushes and looked more closely.

The person by the well was a woman. Was it Sarah Connors? He felt sure it was not; the form was more slender.

"Ellice Cone, I'll bet a cent!" the boy muttered. "But what is she doing there?"

He glanced up at the heavens, wishing the moon would show more brightly. It was behind fleecy clouds, but might show at any time.

Suddenly Nick saw something more. A man was approaching the well. The woman did not appear to see him, but Nick did that and more. He recognized Jason Bostwick.

"What's up?" thought the watcher. "Is it a lovers' meeting, or—"

A sharp little cry sounded at the old well. Bostwick had come up quickly, but with light

steps which made no sound on the lawn. The girl saw him, at last, and she uttered the cry and recoiled.

"Good-evening, Ellice," said Bostwick, easily.

She did not reply. One of her hands was pressed over her heart, and even Nick could see that she was agitated.

"Why, what's the matter, Ellice?" continued Bostwick. "Ain't you glad to see me?"

"You—you startled me," she faltered.

"So I see, but why should you be startled?"

"I didn't know you were coming."

"I shall not bite you."

"I didn't mean that I was afraid of you, Mr. Bostwick," she explained.

"If you are, you have a reason unknown to me."

At that moment the moon came out, throwing its light upon the pair, and on the old well, and Nick saw the man look keenly at Ellice.

"As I said, I am not afraid," she replied, but her voice was still unsteady, and her gaze did not meet his.

"Why have you run away from the house?"

"I haven't run away."

"You have gone, anyhow."

"I went home."

"Just so, but why?"

"I couldn't bear to stay," Ellice replied, her voice so low and tremulous that Nick barely caught the words.

"The tragedy upset you, eh?"

"Yes."

"It was sad about my uncle."

"It was terrible, sir."

"Who could have had the heart to harm him?"

"Nobody, in his right mind."

"Do you think it was anybody out of their mind?"

"I—I did not say that."

"You suggested it."

"I did not mean it," Ellice replied, raising her voice, sharply. "I didn't mean anything of the kind. I only meant that no one who knew the good old squire could have harmed him."

"Then you have no theory?"

"None, sir."

"Perhaps you would be surprised to hear that I have."

Ellice gave a noticeable start. At last her gaze was raised to his face, but she did not speak. He clasped her wrist with one hand and spoke in a slow, distinct voice.

"Young woman, do you know that there are more things in heaven and earth than some people dream of in their simple philosophy?"

She did not answer; she only gazed blankly at her questioner, a frightened expression on her face.

"Ellice," pursued Bostwick, "what is the secret of that place?"

And Nick Nettle saw him point with his free hand to the old well.

The girl recoiled. Her face was pitifully white, and her eyes were full of terror. She tried to free her wrist, but Bostwick held her tightly.

"You don't answer," he said, coldly.

"I—I don't know what you mean," she gasped.

"I will try to make myself clear. On the evening of Squire Hemenway's murder—just a few hours before that terrible event—two persons stood by this well and talked together. Who they were I will leave you to say. One of the two had a knife, and— But there, there!—why go into details? This place and that place has its secrets, and the old well has one. Eh?"

He ceased, and a long silence followed. Ellice breathed pantingly, and trembled from head to foot. Twice she opened her lips to speak, but the silence remained unbroken until Bostwick added:

"Don't think me harsh, my dear Ellice, for I am the best friend you have. I have always noticed you when I came to my uncle's, and your bright face did much to break the gloom of those dull visits. I am not one to go back on my friends. I liked you then, and I like you now. I am going to prove myself your friend. You served my uncle faithfully, and if you don't want to continue with us, I will pension you off. If I give you a few hundred dollars, I am sure I shall be doing no more than the old squire would wish—"

Ellice wrenched her wrist from his grasp, and started back almost tragically.

Nick Nettle saw an abrupt change in her manner.

"I won't take a cent!" she cried, vehemently. "It would be like poison to me. I won't take it!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAMP GROWS DANGEROUS.

NICK NETTLE expected Bostwick to show signs of anger, but the man shrugged his shoulders coolly.

"That will be as you wish, of course," he answered; "but pray don't decide hastily. I want to help you, Ellice; to be your friend. You were so devoted to my uncle that I feel very kindly toward you."

"I only ask to be let alone," the girl replied.

"I hear that you are contemplating marriage. Now, you are poor. Why not let me help you?"

"No, no—I tell you no!" Ellice cried.

"As you will. I understand your motives, and, on the whole, they are natural. In any case, you can rely upon me to be silent. The old well, too, will keep its secret, I think."

"I don't understand you, Jason Bostwick."

"Why, I mean that it is your misfortune, not your fault, that—"

"I did not mean that!" Ellice hastily answered. "I don't understand why you act as you do."

"I trust, Ellice, that I am not destitute of human feeling," Bostwick smoothly replied. "I see you in trouble, and as you have been so faithful, I am not willing you should suffer for what has happened."

"I don't know what has happened."

"We will not argue that point."

He paused for a moment, and then, as she did not speak, added in a lighter voice:

"Were you coming to the house?"

"No, no."

"Did you expect to meet any one here?"

"No. I don't know why I came. I am going, now."

She turned away as she spoke, and Bostwick replied:

"Well, good-night and good luck to you."

Ellice made no answer. She hastened away, and went past Nick Nettle without looking to the right or left. The rose-bushes screened him well, and he kept his place and gave no sign. As the girl receded, he turned his gaze again upon Bostwick.

The latter had lighted a cigar, and was smoking with a calmly satisfied air. There is something smacking of deep content in the way a man smokes a good cigar when his mind is at ease, and Bostwick's manner showed that element now.

He stayed by the well several minutes, and then sauntered back toward the house.

Nick Nettle breathed a sigh of relief and rose. He had been witness to a scene which he regarded as remarkable in its way, but it only added to the mystery of the case he was interested in. There was some secret understanding between Ellice and Bostwick.

What was it?

Once more the girl's horror—it could be called no less—of the Hemenway house had been marked. Why was it thus? The fact that murder had been done there was certainly bad enough, but this would not account for all of her emotion.

Granting that King Hughes had done the deed, and that she knew it, her course was easily explained.

And then Bostwick's almost direct charge. He had stated that two persons stood by the well a few hours before the murder, and that one of the two had a knife. At this point he broke off abruptly. What he had left unsaid Nick could only conjecture, but he had good ground on which to build up a theory.

Tommy Flynn had found a knife in the old well, and they had reason to believe it had belonged to King Hughes. Who would Ellice be most likely to meet by the well? Again, King Hughes.

Had Hughes killed Squire Hemenway, and was Ellice knowing to the fact?

Such seemed to be the only reasonable explanation of the mystery, when viewed from this point, but it left another important fact wholly unexplained.

If Hughes had done the deed, how came Martin Connors's coat stained with blood? Or if the stains were not of blood, why had it been thought necessary to hide it in the old tree?

"It's too much of a puzzle for me," thought Nick, as he walked away. "I begin to think my ambition to be a Nemesis will never be gratified. If there was only one clew, I might follow it up and learn something; but where suspicion points in so many different directions at once, where am I to take hold?"

This was a puzzle which would have troubled a far older head than Nick Nettle's.

The latter walked on, making his way back toward the village. Thinking that he would,

perhaps, attract attention if he passed along the road from Hemenway's, he made a detour to the right and advanced toward the main street at a point unusually dark, where he could emerge very quietly.

His course took him to the small lot of a villager, who had surrounded his yard on three sides by a hedge, and, as the years went on, this hedge had partially bordered the fourth side.

Wishing to pass through the yard, Nick moved toward the hedge, but when within a few feet of it, he saw a man standing beside it. Thinking that it was the owner of the house, Nick went on without hesitation, and was about to address him when he made a discovery.

The man was not the owner of the house, but he was not a stranger to Nick. The latter came to a sudden stop, for in this person he recognized the tramp he had seen at the well, and afterward lost in Stearns's Wood.

The recognition was evidently mutual, for the tramp first ejected a mouthful of tobacco-juice, and then spoke gruffly:

"Hullo, younker! is it you?"

"Yes, it's me," Nick replied, half-mechanically.

"Out fur an evenin' walk?"

"Yes."

"You seem ter be fond o' sech."

"I should say I'm not the only one."

"Humph!"

With this non-committal grunt the tramp gave his tobacco a roll in his mouth and added:

"Seen me afore, ain't ye?"

"Yes."

"Jest so—jest so. Over thar."

He pointed toward the Hemenway house.

"Yes," Nick boldly answered.

"Humph! you hid ahind the bushes. Big thing you did, eh?"

"Rather."

"Rawther!" growled the tramp, in an ugly way. "Say, d'ye know what orter be did with kids like you, that spy on their elders an' betters?"

"Perhaps you'll tell me."

"You ought ter hev yer neck wrung."

"I advise you not to try it."

"Humph! Pretty sneak, you be! You ketch-ed me, that night, didn't ye?"

"No, I didn't."

"Jest so—jest so. Takes a mighty good man ter beat Ben Gleason."

"Do you claim that name?"

"Claim it! It's mine. Blame ye, ye don't s'pose I sail under false colors, do ye?"

The tramp thrust his face forward and scowled menacingly at the boy.

"You ought to know better than I," Nick answered, coolly, for, though he found the tramp evidently a low, brutal, vicious fellow, he was clear-headed enough to try to study the man well.

"I do know," Gleason declared. "I'm a gentleman, I be, my kid."

"No doubt."

"I come o' one o' the best families."

"Do they live around here?"

"No matter where they live. Ef I see fit ter travel, whose business is it? Don't other gentlemen do it? Don't Vahderbilt an' Jay Gould? An' ef they do, ain't I as good right?"

"I don't deny your right, but I don't suppose they are with you now, are they?"

"Who?"

"Vahderbilt and Gould."

"Confound ye, you're too fresh!" snarled Gleason. "You want ter insult me; that's what you want. What sort o' a bringin' up hev you had? Ef thar's a thing that's mean, it's a boy who insults his betters an' elders!"

And the speaker shook his fist at Nick.

"Don't be wrathy," the boy coolly advised. "I had no intention of insulting you; it was only light talk. And now I'll move on. Good-night!"

He started to pass the tramp. The latter stepped back a pace, and the way seemed clear, but, as Nick tried to go on, Gleason suddenly sprang forward and grasped the boy in his arms. Another moment and his big hand closed over Nick's mouth.

Nick was alarmed. He had considered himself fully upon his guard, but Gleason had shown most surprising agility, and had won so quickly that Nick had no chance at all. Despite that he now struggled stoutly, but the tramp's arms were strong, and his hand prevented any outcry on Nick's part.

The latter was forced to give up the unequal fight.

"You would, would ye?" cried the captor

"Think you are a big toad in the puddle, don't ye?"

Nick tried to speak, but the broad hand over his mouth prevented any outcry or words.

"Curious ter know what I wanted at the well, wa'n't ye? Like ter baffle all my plans, wouldn't ye?"

Viciously enough the fellow continued his harangue, but his manner suddenly changed. Growing calmer, he spoke in a low, deep voice.

"Kid, I ain't goin' ter harm ye ef you're wise, but I'm yer deadly p'ison ef ye kick. You've got ter come with me. You're dangerous ter me, you be, an' I ain't goin' ter hev ye go snoopin' around. Not ef I know it, an' I think I do. I'm goin' ter put ye out o' the way, an', ef you make a row, you go out o' the way *forever*!"

With this significant threat he lifted the boy in his arms, despite the latter's struggles, and started off at a good pace, his course being toward Stearns's Wood.

CHAPTER XII. BOXED UP.

NICK NETTLE struggled to the best of his ability. Despite the assurance of the tramp that he should not be harmed there certainly was great cause for fear. Gleason had threatened that if he "made a row" he would be put "out of the way forever," and the fact that they were moving toward the woods was not reassuring, to say the least.

All his efforts went for nothing, however; his strength was as nothing compared with that of the tramp; and the latter walked coolly on.

Nick could neither free himself nor sound an alarm.

After going a few rods, however, his captor turned to the left and began moving along the rear of the village. He evidently had some clear idea in mind, but what it was Nick could not surmise.

In this way a hundred yards were passed, and then Nick saw a building directly ahead. He knew what it was—an old, tumble-down barn which had long been deserted, except that its owner used it as a store-house for heavy farming implements.

Gleason reached it and paused by the door.

From Nick's earliest recollections the old barn had been kept nailed up, and he hoped it was so now, but disappointment awaited him. The tramp easily opened the door, and marched in with Nick. Once there he set the boy upon his feet.

All was dark and silent around them.

"I'm goin' ter take my hand off yer mouth," said Gleason, "but I warn ye not ter make a racket. Ef ye squawl, off goes yer head. I ain't the man ter fool with kids like you, an' I'd jest as soon wipe ye out as not. Will yer hold yer tongue?"

The heavy hand was removed as the question was asked.

"Yes," Nick briefly replied.

"Good! Then I'll show a light."

He moved forward a few paces, still holding his prisoner, and then scratched a match. This done he lighted a lantern, and a feeble light shone in the place.

"Hyar we be," the tramp more cheerfully continued. "Ain't hurt, be ye?"

"No."

"Nor I ain't," was the grim comment. "Let down on that box!"

Nick obeyed, and the tramp held the lantern close to his face.

"Rather a pooty-lookin' critter, you be. It would be a pity ter hurt sech. Wouldn't like it ef I se ter tramp all over yer face an' mangle ye, eh?"

"No, I shouldn't."

"Thought not. Wal, you sail low, an' you sha'n't be hurt, pooty boy, but ef ye ride, rusty, jest look out fur me. I'm a terror, I be. B'en in seventeen different prisons in my life an' sentenced fur 'most ev'ry crime in the calendar. The only thing I ain't never done is ter smash a pooty boy all ter pieces. Mebbe I shall soon."

"I don't see any reason why you should 'smash' me," Nick steadily observed.

"You don't?"

"No."

"Who's been nosin' around my biz?"

"I don't know."

"Don't, eh? Wal, I do; it's a chap about your size. Oh! I know ye; you tried ter track me when ye found me at the well, but I reckon you found the old man yer match. Didn't get me fur a cent, did ye?"

"You fooled me, I admit."

"Humph!"

Gleason suddenly brought his face nearer to Nick's, and scowled worse than ever.

"What do you keer who killed Hemenway?" he growled.

"Who said I did care?"

"Why else be you nosin' around?"

"I suppose I'm a free agent; and then, again, you didn't kill him, did you?"

Nick put the question boldly. Every moment he grew more confident, and more inclined to use his tongue as he saw fit. Gleason talked freely, and he ought to have as many privileges as a tramp.

The last question was evidently a startler, however. The tramp started, his lower jaw dropped, and he stared blankly at the boy. Nick could not read his face distinctly in the unfavorable light, but he had no doubt that his shot had gone home. Gleason was silent. Had the question robbed his once nimble tongue of all power?

He answered at last, and in a threatening voice:

"What d'ye mean by sech rubbish?"

"Wasn't my question plain?"

"Too infernal plain. Me, kill him? Me, hurt anybody? Why, younker, I couldn't do it; I'm the meekest, most inoffensive feller alive. Me, kill the old man! Look a-hyar, you brat, I'm tempted ter take ye by the neck an' twist yer pooty head off, as I would a chicken!"

The threat did not fail to startle Nick considerably.

"Don't you touch me!" he exclaimed.

"Oh! no; of course not. Don't tech me! Let me abuse you all I want ter; let me lie about a 'spectable gentleman; but don't hit me back. Don't! Good thunder! how comikell! But why do I waste time on a kid? I won't."

Gleason arose, looked around thoughtfully, and then fixed his gaze again upon Nick.

"I've got a bit o' biz elsewhere," he explained, "an' I've got ter go away. What be I goin' ter do with you?"

"I'll go, too."

"You will, will ye? Perhaps! Possibly! Hebbel! Kid, you won't do nothin' o' the sort. I ain't goin' ter have you runnin' around spreadin' yer infamous lies ag'in' a gentleman—which is me. You will stay hyar, an' I hev the means o' makin' ye do it. Now, see hyar! I don't want ter hurt ye, but I'm goin' ter leave ye safe, an' ter do this I must tie ye up a bit. You can't git out on't, so, now, show hoss-sense and submit quiet."

There was a ring about the fellow's voice which showed that he was not to be trifled with, and Nick Nettle was wise enough to realize it and decide to accept the inevitable.

He said as much, briefly.

Gleason seemed relieved, and out of an old box he took a long, stout cord. With this he bound the boy's hands and feet. This done, he went a few yards away, and was busy for a while.

When he came back he carried a stick with a notch in each end.

"Take in yer bits," he said, grimly.

"What is that?"

"A gag."

"I object to being gagged!" Nick exclaimed, with sudden indignation.

"All right; don't cost ye nothin' ter object; but in goes the gag, jest the same. It's got ter be done, so don't kick. Take it in!"

There was no way to avoid it, and Nick submitted with as good grace as possible. The gag was thrust into his mouth, and then Gleason lifted and put him into a box which had once been a dry-goods case. This was not large enough to admit of his lying down, and he was left in a standing position.

"Next thing," continued Gleason, "I'll nail on the cover ter the box. You needn't be afeerd o' want o' air, fur I see the cover is a good bit broke up; an' it will sarve ter keep ye quiet-like while I'm gone. I advise ye ter behave wal, fur ef ye don't, I'll fix ye when I git back."

Nick Nettle would have expostulated stoutly if he could, but the gag prevented his saying a word. The tramp put on the cover, drove in a few nails, and the work was done.

Gleason held up the lantern, and the light fell in broad bars through the openings in the half-shattered cover.

"Don't forget to keep still," he again cautioned. "I'm off, now."

He blew out the light, and darkness once more reigned in the old barn.

Nick heard Gleason in retreat; heard the door of the barn closed and fastened; and then all was still about him. He instinctively stirred, but his place of imprisonment did not admit of any great freedom of movement.

"Well," he muttered, "if this ain't the worst fix I was ever in, I'm no judge!"

He certainly did not exaggerate. Bound hand and foot, gagged, and nailed up in the box, he was about as helpless as any person living.

He had been glad to have Gleason go, feeling a vague hope that he might then in some way escape, but, now that he was alone, he did not see how this could be done. Had he not been in the box he would have tried to roll to the door, kick it open and then get outside, if nothing more; but the box put a prompt and effectual veto upon that.

He could not leave it until his bonds were cast off.

And those bonds! They hung to him firmly and persistently. He tried them thoroughly, but not an atom did they yield. The tramp had done his work well, and it would require other hands than Nick's to unfasten the cords.

Convinced of this at last, the boy settled back with a sort of dogged anger. He was thoroughly imbibed against the tramp, and determined to get square with him if he could.

At that moment Nick would almost have sworn that it was Ben Gleason who killed Squire Hemenway. Certainly, a strong case could be made out against him. He was a vicious person; he had been skulking around the village suspiciously; he was very angry because Nick had played the spy upon him; and he had shown unmistakable emotion when the boy insinuated that he might be the murderer.

"And he is!" muttered the young prisoner. "All this can't be chance. He's afraid of me, and why should he be unless it was he who killed the squire? It was he!"

The words were uttered all the more stubbornly because Nick was not sure of what he said. He remembered Martin Connors's blood-stained coat; he remembered the striking circumstances which pointed to King Hughes as the guilty person; and then the old mystery confronted him as before.

Who had killed the old squire?

It was a riddle at present as unreadable as the Sphinx, and Nick felt utterly at a loss to know what to think.

And his captivity? How was that to end? Even when Gleason returned, would he be any better off? Certainly the man would not dare to release him after the violence he had committed. Would he keep him prisoner, or—An ugly possibility presented itself. He did not think well enough of the tramp to feel sure that his own life was safe.

Possibly Gleason would silence him "forever," as the tramp had himself expressed it, to keep the secret. The future did not look promising.

An hour later there was an alarm given in the village—it had been discovered that the old barn back of the main street was on fire.

The villagers rallied as quickly as possible. The building was old, and certainly not as valuable as those filled with hay and live-stock, but the instinct to save even such a building from the flames is always strong, and in this case it was known that a mowing-machine and other valuable farming implements were housed there.

But when the villagers caught sight of the old barn there was only one opinion among them. It was wrapped in flames and blazing fiercely, and even a well-drilled fire company might have despaired of saving it.

What could be done in the present case, with only pails to use, and water several rods away?

"No use," said one man, as he ran along.

"We're too late," added another.

"The old bulk is dooned."

"And all in it."

"Yes; unless somebody has been ahead of us."

This hope was dispelled as they arrived upon the scene. They were the first there. And before them was a roaring area of flame, the barn burning furiously, and they halted.

"It's sure death to go in there."

"I won't try it."

"Nor I. Everything in there is doomed. Look—the roof trembles: it's going to fall in."

"Hark! What was that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought I heard a human cry inside."

It was pronounced only fancy on his part, and just then the roof tottered and fell in with a crash. Then the last hope of saving whatever was inside was forever gone.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISSING NICK.

ANOTHER day had dawned.

The village was nearly as quiet as usual, but some of the people walked over to see the ruins of the old barn. The work of the fire-fiend had been complete and sweeping. Only a pile of

shapeless, blackened timbers remained, with a bed of glowing coals in the middle.

It was a matter of some satisfaction that all losses had been covered, in a measure, by insurance. Not even a hoe had been saved, and as the owner lost all of his agricultural tools of any size, he was lucky to have the insurance to reimburse him partially.

The man who thought he had heard a human cry from the blazing ruin repeated his story in the morning, but no one believed him. Surely, they agreed, no one would be so reckless as to enter the fiery pit of flame, and as the owner, the man most interested, was safe, it was decided that the supposed human cry was only the crackling of the fire.

Early in the forenoon Sheriff Lovering called at the house of Hunter, the fish-peddler, who was also the father of Nick Nettle, it will be remembered.

Mrs. Hunter answered his ring.

"Is Nick in?" the sheriff asked.

"No, sir, he isn't."

Mrs. Hunter could be sweet enough to all save Nick, and she answered Lovering very pleasantly.

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"No, I don't."

"Hasn't he been here since breakfast?"

"No; nor even then."

"How is that?"

"Well, it's a bit odd, and I don't understand it. Nick didn't come home last night."

"Don't you know where he was?"

"No."

Lovering looked at the woman sharply. He knew her reputation, and that she had abused and hated Nick, and now he suspected that she might be uncommunicative, because Nick was the subject of conversation.

But Mrs. Hunter affably added:

"I dare say he stayed with some of his young friends. He was not here this morning, and, when I went up to his room, I found that his bed had not been slept in."

"Does he often stay away over night?"

"I don't know that he ever did before, but such a boy as Nick Hunter is liable to do 'most anything."

She could not avoid giving the object of her antipathy a thrust, even then.

"If he stopped with a friend, who would it most likely be?" asked the sheriff.

"That Irish boy, Tom Flynn."

"I'll call on Tommy."

Lovering went, and found young Flynn busily engaged in an attack upon the wood-pile.

"Hallo, my young friend! You're hard at it, I see," bluffed the sheriff.

"Jest a thrifle, sor," Tommy replied.

"Where's your chum?"

"Nick Nettle?"

"Yes."

"Don't know, sor; I haven't see'd him sence yesterday afternoon."

"Then he didn't stay here last night?"

"Oh! no," answered Tommy, with a wondering look.

"Nor did he go home at all last night, nor can I find him. Where do you suppose he is?"

Tommy's face bore an anxious look.

"Have ye been to de hotel?"

"Yes."

The boy looked very soberly at Lovering. It had been mentioned between him and Nick that they were liable to get into trouble by interfering with men who had been desperate enough to kill Squire Hemenway, and an unpleasant fear was now in Tommy's mind.

"I don't know where he kin be," he admitted.

"Were you at the fire, last night?"

"Yis, sor."

"Did you see Nick?"

"No."

The sheriff meditated for a moment. He remembered the story of the man who thought he had heard a human cry in the old barn, and wondered if Nick Nettle, young, brave and impulsive, would have been reckless enough to risk his life in the blazing building. At the same time Tommy had not heard the report about the alleged cry, and he did not catch Lovering's meaning.

"I don't see where Nick can be," he gravely added.

"He will show up, presently," the sheriff reassuringly replied. "I wanted to see you as much as him, and have a few questions to ask. Have you told any one about the knife you found in the old well?"

"No, sor. Didn't I promise you dat I wouldn't tell a blessed word?"

"You did, and I am glad if you have kept

your promise. Now, I have some more questions, and I want you to be as silent in regard to them. Do you remember the time that a certain young man of this village was drunk at the hotel, and flourished a knife which he carried?"

"I do, sor—I was there."

"Who was that young man?"

"King Hughes, sor."

"Did you take notice of the knife he had?"

"I did that."

"Well, did it resemble the knife you and Nick Nettle found in the well?"

Tommy did not answer at once. He could not but see the drift of the sheriff's questions. King Hughes was suspected. As for him, he felt that he ought to answer carefully, and not do harm to a man who might be innocent.

"What have you to say?" Lovering asked, somewhat impatiently.

"I think de two knives look aloike," Tommy admitted.

"Can you swear that they are one and the same?"

"No."

"I wish you could."

"It's no use, sor. They look aloike; I can say dat, an' no more. I didn't have King's knife in me hand, annyway, so I can't be sure."

"But you are willing to say that the two knives look alike?"

"Yis."

"That's all I can ask of you. Now, remember to keep still about this; and if you see Nick Hunter before I do, tell him I want to see him at my office."

"I will, sor."

The sheriff walked away, leaving Tommy looking after him thoughtfully.

"He's got his eye on King Hughes, sure, an' ef King don't look out, he'll foind hisself in de lock-up wan av these days. I must find Nick, an' let him know phat's in de wind, or de sheriff will git ahead av us, an' we sha'n't win any glory."

Tommy busied himself during the next five minutes at the wood-pile, and certainly deserved "glory" for the way in which he made the sticks fly. At the end of that time his work was done, and he set out to find Nick Nettle.

He could not avoid a feeling of uneasiness when he remembered that Lovering had said that Nick had not been home the previous night. This would have been singular at any time, but when he recalled how active Nick had been in the Hemenway case, and what cause the real murderer had to fear the boy if he was one of the suspected persons, Tommy was really afraid that his young friend had come to harm.

He searched all around the village, but neither found Nick nor gained trace of him.

During the search he came upon the man who claimed to have heard a human cry from the burning barn, and as the man was telling the story with the obstinacy peculiar to some persons when they are contradicted, it made a still deeper impression on young Flynn.

He really began to fear that Nick had entered the barn, hoping to save something from the fire, and perished there.

Once more he went up to see the ruins. Nobody else was visible, but the bed of coals was still glowing brightly, and Tommy shivered as he looked at them.

He would have given much to be sure that Nick was alive and well.

He was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he paid no attention to anything around, and his first intimation that he was not alone came when a voice addressed him.

"Hullo, younker!"

Tommy turned quickly. There stood a rough, dirty, ragged man of middle age, who had the sign "tramp" written all over him. A disreputable-looking person, surely, but he did not appear belligerent just then. Tommy was quick-witted enough to remember the tramp Nick had seen at the well, and he wondered if the fellow was again around.

"Quite a fire," added the man in rags.

"Yis."

"Was you hear?"

"I was that."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No."

"That air is good; I've got a tender heart, I hev, an' I'd bate ter hev anybody hurt. Insurance on it?"

"I believe so."

"Jes' so—jes' so."

The tramp muttered the words in a thick voice, staring at the ruins. He shifted his posi-

tion from one foot to another, and seemed ill at ease. Tommy could not but think that the man was unusually pale for a tramp, but he knew no good reason why he should be pale.

Possibly the tramp did.

"Lemme see," the latter continued, "ain't yer name Flynn?"

"It is, that," Tommy answered.

"You've got a frien' named Nick Nettle?"

"Yis."

"Whar is Nick?"

The ragged man turned his gaze upon Tommy as he spoke with an expression which the boy thought singularly like anxiety. Tommy watched him sharply in return. Was he the man of whom Nick had told?—the tramp seen at the well?

To the last question the boy replied:

"I don't know."

"Don't know?"

"No."

"How's that?"

"Nick is missin'—ain't b'en home sence yesterday. I've looked high an' low, but I can't find him."

Was it fancy, or did the tramp's pale cheeks grow paler?

"How do ye account fur it?" the ragged man asked, in a husky voice.

"I'm afear'd Nick has met wid foul play."

The tramp passed his hand quickly over his face, and that hand trembled perceptibly. He looked at the glowing coals, and his pallor became quite ghastly. If he had expected to see a ghost rise from the ruins of the barn, he might have looked as he looked then.

Tommy Flynn grew more suspicious. He did not understand the ragged man at all, but his agitation was so evident that he felt sure there was something wrong.

Had this disreputable person harmed Nick?

"Perhaps," suggested Tommy, "you kin tell phat has become ave Nick Nettle?"

CHAPTER XIV.

WORKING IN THE DARK.

THE tramp aroused from his meditation with a start. He turned his gaze upon Tommy, and a startled light was in his eyes.

"Eh? What's that?" he demanded.

"I said mebbe you could tell phat had become ave Nick Nettle."

"How should I know?"

"Ain't he a frien' o' yourn?"

The tramp laughed uneasily, unnaturally.

"Never seen him in my life," he replied.

"Then how did ye happen ter inquire fur him?"

"Oh! I've heerd o' both on ye," glibly replied the man. "Ye see, I live in Iowa, an' only 'rived in town this mornin', but I've had frien's hyar, an' I've heerd o' you an' him."

"What's yer name?"

"Ben Gleason."

"Who be yer frien's hyar?"

"See hyar, younker, et strikes me you're askin' a heap o' questions. Don't think I'll answer any more. Don't fancy bein' put ter the katekrism, like a nigger slave on a horse-block. I'm white, I be, an' a free man an' a gentleman. Sech, younker, don't like ter be badgered with questions. Bar it in mind, will yer?"

Mr. Gleason talked very fast, and seemed to wish Tommy to think him fully at ease.

"Be you sure," demanded Flynn, sticking grimly to his purpose, "that you ain't done harrum ter Nick?"

"Me?" cried the tramp. "Me harm him? Why, it ain't in me. I'm as gentle as a lamb, I be, as any o' my friends kin certify. I wouldn't harm no boy."

He stole a side glance at the glowing coals.

"You don't on'stand me, younker," he rapidly continued. "I'm a gentleman, I be, an' my record is as clean as any gent's. I don't wear so good clothes jest now as some, but I was in a railroad accident last week, an' I got pooty much tore an' s'iled. That's all I've got ter say now."

He looked toward Stearn's Wood.

"Good-by!" he added, and moved away with long steps.

Tommy looked after him dubiously, suspiciously. If aid had been at hand he would have demanded Ben Gleason's arrest, but he knew that the tramp could make good his escape before aid would come. Thinking rapidly, he had decided that the quiet way was the best, and he only waited to see the man disappear in the woods.

This done, he hastened tyward Sheriff Lovering's office.

"That tramp has done harrum ter Nick, an'

"I know it!" he thought. "I'll hev de sheriff arter him, ef he'll go."

Tommy would have been more mystified than ever could he have seen the tramp at that moment.

Gleason entered the wood, went a few paces, and then paused and looked nervously around. Next he took off his battered hat and wiped his forehead, on which stood great beads of perspiration not called there by his exertions nor the heat of the day.

"By the fends!" he whispered, hoarsely, "I believe that boy's death lies at my door. There is only one way to explain the fact that he is missing—he was burned up in the old barn. The way I left him he could never have got loose alone, and help came too late. Yes, Nick Nettle is dead, and I am his murderer!"

Again he brushed his forehead, for the perspiration gathered there rapidly. And it was icy cold, though the day was warm.

"I didn't mean to do it," muttered the man, as though defending himself from a spoken accusation. "How was I to know the barn would burn? I'm afraid I dropped a match carelessly, but I didn't think to do this. Nobody can blame it upon me—but I am to blame. His blood is on my hands!"

He held up those hands, as though he expected to see red stains on them, but the only discoloration was dirt.

He suddenly looked back toward the village.

"That Irish boy suspected me, and it would be just like him to set officers on my track. I must get away, or arrest will follow."

With long steps he moved off, making for the thickest part of the wood. But he need not have been afraid. Tommy Flynn told his story to Lovering, but the sheriff declined to make an arrest on such fragile grounds; and the man who used the language of the ignorant in conversation, and dropped it for correct speech in soliloquy, was for the time safe from man's punishment, at least.

But Divine justice never sleeps.

Jason Bostwick was walking along the street with a quick, swinging step. Jason ought to have been a great man in town, just then, for he had succeeded to the wealth of the richest man in town, but the fact remained that he was not regarded as a great man, or desirable citizen.

He was little known in town, but the general opinion had been against him in the old days, and when he came back as master, the citizens somehow felt that they had sustained a personal grievance in the change of owners at Hemenway.

Jason had just come from Lovering's office. He had all along been duly sympathetic, and had several times said various pretty things about his "poor uncle"—really, Jason's mother had been the squire's niece—but he could not bring real regret into his voice.

The sheriff felt sure that the heir had shed no tears when he heard of Hemenway's death.

When Bostwick again paused it was at the house of Mr. Willis. He had made the acquaintance of the family years before, but this was his first call, and Martha, who answered his ring, was surprised to see him there. A girl with more vanity might have suspected that, now he was likely to settle in town, Jason was looking for a wife, but Martha merely concluded that he wanted to see her father.

He did not follow up his greeting with any such request, so she had to invite him in without knowing why he was there.

His explanation was ready by the time he was in the hall.

"I got terribly lonesome at Hemenway," he said, "and felt the need of going somewhere. Real acquaintances are few for me here, so you will excuse me, I hope, for going where I thought I could enjoy myself."

It was rather a "nice" speech, and Martha could do no less than assure him that he was welcome.

She ushered him into the sitting-room.

Here an annoyance awaited him. He had hoped to see Martha and her father alone, but the field was already occupied. An old gentleman was present, and he was introduced as Mr. Crooks. Very bland and pleasant was Mr. Crooks, and he shook hands with Bostwick cordially.

"Glad to meet you, sir; glad to meet you!" he asserted. "It is a pleasure to form acquaintances here, for I am almost a stranger. You see, Mr. Bostwick, I am at the hotel for a few days—how many I don't know. I really like your town; have done so ever since I saw the water-lilies over in the pond. Famous, they

are. I have two boys bring me some every day. I like lilies!"

His round, red face glowed with peace and good will to men. A benevolent old gentleman was Mr. Crooks.

"I don't care for flowers," replied Jason, briefly.

"No? Like hunting?"

"Yes."

"So do I. Grand sport. Any game in your woods?"

"I hardly know."

"I hear you have lately come into possession."

"I am not so sure of that."

"Eh?"

"I am the direct heir," replied Jason, looking hard at Willis as he spoke, "but it is not yet known whether there is a will. What is your opinion, Mr. Willis?"

"It is generally thought there is no will," Willis answered, frankly. "Besides, who would the old squire have left his property to, if not to you?"

"That is the question. You knew him well, Mr. Willis. Do you know of any other heir?"

Jason's gaze did not wander from the host's face. He had very fair powers of self-control, but he showed some eagerness now, and his regard was piercing.

"If there is any other relative anywhere, I am ignorant of it," Willis answered. "I don't know of one."

A look of relief passed over Jason's face, and he slowly turned toward Martha. Whatever he was about to say was prevented by Crooks.

"Afraid your inheritance will slip through your fingers, Mr. Bostwick?" he blandly asked. Bostwick scowled.

"Excuse me, sir; you don't understand," he stiffly replied.

"Our fingers do itch for money, eh?" and Mr. Crooks smiled placidly.

"Perhaps yours do."

"You were your uncle's favorite, were you not?"

"Mr. Crooks, you will excuse me, but I prefer not to converse in this vein. The sad death of my uncle makes such talk seem flippant and out of place."

"A very commendable sentiment," said Mr. Willis, quickly. "It does you credit, Mr. Bostwick."

"If sincere," dryly added Crooks.

Bostwick flashed an angry glance at him, but Martha came to the rescue. She saw the danger of trouble and skillfully changed the subject. Crooks's transient venom vanished, and a rather pleasant half-hour followed. Jason made an effort, and was more agreeable than usual, and, when he arose to go, Willis cordially asked him to call again.

The new master of Hemenway left the house with a satisfied smile on his face.

"All's well!" he muttered, under his breath. "I have plain sailing ahead of me now."

CHAPTER XV.

THE BLOW FALLS.

NIGHT had come once more.

Ellice Cone sat on the threshold of her relative's house and looked out into the darkness with a sad, weary expression on her young face. She had taken this position at twilight, and for an hour had scarcely stirred. Deep in meditation she certainly was, and her expression indicated that her thoughts were the very reverse of pleasant.

All the other members of the family were away on an evening visit, and there had been no one to disturb her melancholy mood.

Now, however, some one came along the street, turned into the yard and advanced toward her with quick, nervous steps. She recognized him at once; it was King Hughes.

A great fear fell upon her. She saw that his movements were unusual, and argued the worst from it. What new misfortune menaced them? Hughes came closer, but she could not command her voice to address him.

"Are you alone?" he abruptly asked.

"Yes."

"Then go into the house. I want to see you."

"King, what is wrong?"

"I will tell you in the house. Don't stop here."

He took her by the arm, and actually pushed her into the house. For herself, she was almost incapable of motion. His manner told beyond question that something serious had occurred, or was liable to, and she was nearly overcome.

Hughes locked the outer door and led her to the sitting-room.

"Shall I get a light?" she asked, mechanically.

"A light? No. Anything but that. I don't want any one to know that I am here."

"Why not?"

"Because," and he leaned forward in his chair, "I am a hunted man!"

"King!" she gasped, in terror.

"It has come, just as we expected," he hoarsely added. "I am suspected! They are watching me, and it was only by an artifice that I got away. They surrounded the house, but I saw them hiding in the bushes, and, when darkness came, I used my wits, too, and managed to slip away from them."

"But they will find you."

"Not unless they do it soon."

"What do you mean?"

"I am going to take to flight!"

Ellice looked at him in mute agony. If the room had been lighted it would have shown her face miserably pale, but even that would not have revealed the agony that tore, vulture-like, at her heart.

"There is no other way," Hughes added.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know; anywhere, to keep away from them. I go out to be a murderer on the face of the earth, or—to be brought back as a murderer."

"Oh! King! King!" the girl wailed.

"We may as well face the matter," he went on, with feverish recklessness. "They won't mince matters. A reward is offered for Squire Hemenway's murderer, and they will hunt me like a wild beast."

"Heaven have mercy upon us!"

"No doubt it will; 'twill be, at least, as merciful as I was to the old squire. But I can tell these man-hunters—Lovering and the rest—that they haven't got me yet. Thank fortune, I am no beggar! I have money, and if I can once get away from here, I have great hopes of eluding them."

"But when shall I see you again?"

"Heaven only knows."

King's voice was husky with emotion, and Ellice answered in a frightened way:

"Oh! King, we have not got to part forever?"

"No!" he replied, quickly. "Don't fear as to that; I'll send for you if I get clear of these bloodhounds. If I am dragged back and hung, it's a different matter."

"King!—oh! don't say such terrible things."

"We may as well face the worst," he returned, in a hard voice. "In my flight I am one man against thousands. Men and women, old and young, rich and poor, saints and sinners—all will be eager to hound me down. There is no pity among mankind. And then the telegraph—I fear that accursed thing more than all the men they can raise."

"Why don't you stay here and hide? Let me secrete you. They may not think of looking here."

"It is the first place they would look; they may even be on their way here now. Your devotion to me is well known."

He paused, and then added in a tremulous voice:

"Yes, it is well known, even to me, wretched, miserable fool that I am. Ellice, would to Heaven you had never seen me; I have been the curse of your life. I don't know why you ever gave a thought to such a wretch—"

"King!"

"Hear me out, I must free my mind, Ellice. I have been a drunkard ever since I was old enough to be my own master about town. I admit this, but my eyes are at last opened. You know to what a pitch liquor has brought me, and I know, too. I am done. Hear me, Ellice, when I swear that I will never touch liquor again!"

The girl went quickly to his side, and put her arms around his neck.

"Oh! King, I am so glad!" she murmured.

"It is tardy repentance, and it won't get me out of this danger," he gloomily replied.

"Why not tell Mr. Willis? He is clear-headed and influential—"

"No. Willis and I can never again be friends. He is a good man, and could overlook my impertinence to him, but I have done one thing he can't forgive. He brought Martha up as his own child, and hoped she would never know she was otherwise, but I betrayed all in my drunken anger. Who she really is I don't know, but, years ago, when my father was alive, I overheard a talk between him and Willis which revealed the fact that she was only a waif. Willis will never forgive me— But I am wasting time here. I must go!"

He clasped Ellice in his arms and kissed her.

"When shall I hear from you?" she whispered.

"Heaven knows—I don't. Not until I am beyond the pale of danger. Ellice, if I do escape, and send for you, will you come to me?"

"Yes."

"Even to a foreign land?"

"To the end of the world, if you are there."

Hughes suddenly raised his head.

"Hark! have your folks returned?"

"No; I think not."

"I thought I heard a footstep in the hall."

"I heard nothing."

"Probably it was my fancy. And now as to the future. Are you really sure you are willing to follow my desperate fortunes?"

"Forever, King!"

"Stained as I am with the old squire's blood?"

"Hush!—hush! Don't say that! Don't let the words pass your lips!" she feverishly whispered.

"You are the noblest of women, Ellice, and I will do my best to repay your devotion if I get out of this. And now to say good-by. It's a bitter thing to do, but every moment is of value and I must be gone."

He clasped her tighter in his arms; he kissed her trembling lips; and then arose hurriedly. Man that he was, he felt that he would break down if that interview was prolonged. He murmured a few words of farewell, took two quick steps and opened the hall door.

There he recoiled suddenly.

A hand grasped his arm, and a stern voice uttered a brief accusation:

"I arrest you, King Hughes, in the name of law!"

Three men entered the sitting-room, and the light of a bull's-eye lantern was thrown upon King's face. It showed him almost deathly pale.

He stared blankly at the new-comers. One of them he recognized as Sheriff Lovering; the others were not residents of the town. Dimly, too, Hughes recognized the fact that a faint cry had sounded behind him, and he knew how heavily the blow had fallen upon Ellice.

"You don't ask why you are arrested," pursued the last speaker, after a pause, "and I reckon you need no light. I will say, however, that you are charged with murdering old Squire Hemenway!"

Ellice fell on her knees at the speaker's feet.

"Mercy! mercy!" she wailed. "He is innocent! I swear it!"

"You're a good witness for him, ain't you?" was the rough retort. "Beware that you don't get arrested, too. You have been knowing to his crime from the first, and I am not sure but you were a party to the murder. That remains to be shown, but Mister Hughes is in the toils."

"I am innocent!" declared Hughes, but his voice was unsteady.

"Now, don't come the old dodge. Reserve your declaration until you go on trial. You are not compelled by law to testify against yourself, and you may criminate yourself by idle talk."

"But—"

"I don't mind saying that we have a dead-sure thing on you. Squire Hemenway was supposed to know you but slightly, but we can prove that, for Ellice Cone's sake, he held out a helping hand to check you in your downward career, and had you and Ellice in his presence, secretly, several times, to try and arrange a plan for your future and hers—to save you from ruin. What was his reward? The night of the murder you was there to see him, and you had a knife with you. Ellice Cone saw it, when you talked with her by the well. That knife, held in your hand, King Hughes, killed the old squire. You hid it in the well afterward, but we found it; we have it now. That's all I have to say now. Off you go to jail!"

With a strong hand he pushed Hughes through the door. The latter tried to speak, but his tongue seemed palsied.

The stern captors went out, holding him fast, and Ellice dropped into a chair, almost unconscious.

The dreaded blow had fallen!

CHAPTER XVI.

A LIVELY CHASE.

At the same hour when King Hughes was being marched off to prison, Tommy Flynn was crossing the field which separated Stearns's Wood from the village. His movements were slow and cautious, and he seemed doing his best to avoid notice.

His course was toward the Hemenway house,

and, as he went, he frequently glanced toward the building. A light shone from the kitchen window, but, otherwise, all was dark as far as he could see.

When he drew nearer, Tommy's caution increased. Silently and carefully he made his way to the north end of the house, and then, as he saw no sign of unusual life, he mounted to the roof of the lean-to shed mentioned in the earlier part of this story.

Up the roof he went to the window. Darkness reigned inside, and he could hear no sound. He tried the window; it was not fastened.

Then, with great care, he raised the lower sash.

This done he made a long pause, using his ears attentively, but the upper part of the house seemed to be as deserted as a wilderness.

Cautiously he crept through to the room beyond. Here he again paused, and in some perplexity. He had a certain work to do, and unfamiliarity with the house made it difficult, as well as dangerous.

He had provided himself with matches, and he ventured to light one of them. It revealed a vacant room, barring his own presence. Before the light died out he had located the door, and to this he now moved.

"Wish I had some m'anes ave silf-defense," he thought. "Ef they ketches me here dey won't hesitate ter fix me flint, an' I haven't a thing ter do ag'in' 'em."

He opened the door carefully.

Finding that darkness and silence still prevailed in advance, he went on. Not to dwell upon his investigation, it may be briefly said that he was on the same scene where Nick Nettle had his adventures, and that in a short time, Tommy had satisfied himself that he was the only person in the upper part of the house.

He retreated to the window over the shed.

"This is qu'are," he muttered, "an' I don't understand it at all. Begorra, phat am I ter do?"

The sound of voices outside attracted his attention, and he crept quietly out on the roof of the shed and moved to where he could gain a view of the yard.

The sky was clouded, but back of all was the moon, and Tommy had enough light for his purpose.

He saw a covered carriage in the yard, and, just as he looked, a burden was lifted and thrust inside. Then the door closed with a bang; a man sprang to the seat of the carriage; and the vehicle rolled away with the whip cracking near the ears of the horses.

"Begorra!" young Flynn ejaculated, "it's too late I am. Phat am I ter do now? I must ketch dat outfit, ef it takes me legs off!"

He rubbed his forehead dubiously, but his face suddenly brightened.

"Dat's de-idea!" he exclaimed. "I'll do it!"

The carriage had taken the road which led away from the village, and Tommy dashed in the same direction. Not far did he follow the road, however. He leaped the fence on the right hand side of the highway, and then, running a few paces, looked eagerly around.

As though to answer his glance, the whinny of a horse sounded a few yards away.

"Whoop!" cried the boy, "I ain't beat yit."

He rushed up to the horse, which greeted him with evident pleasure. It was an animal owned by a man in the village, and Tommy had often handled it. He now had a definite purpose in view, and he led it out of the lot.

This done, he sprung upon its back, and, without saddle or bridle, went clattering down the road in pursuit of the carriage.

"Go it, me beauties!" he cried, shaking his fist after the now-invisible vehicle. "I'll be 'round pretty soon. Ef Black Joe can't run yez down, I'm no jedge av hoss-flesh."

He gave his horse a friendly slap, and "Black Joe" responded by increasing his pace. Tommy had often ridden him as in the present case, and the horse was so well trained that, with the boy on his back, a bridle was not necessary.

It was no pleasure ride which young Flynn was taking. He was "on the war-path," and he expected to see wild times before he got through. If any one had been able to assure him that his life was not in danger, Tommy would have been duly grateful, for he knew there were desperate men in the carriage, but not for a moment did he think of giving up.

Along the smooth road he clattered at full speed.

The carriage had gained quite a start, and it was several minutes before he again sighted it; but, gradually, a dark spot in the distance as-

sumed form, and he knew it was the outfit of the party he wanted.

"Oh, begorra," he muttered, "don't I wish I had Sheriff Lovering hyar now! They're n'aded, but I reckon I'll hev ter wait until we git to de next village."

He no longer urged Black Joe. There were two men in the carriage, and he was not rash enough to think of engaging them in fight alone.

The best thing he could do was to hang on their track until the other village was reached, and then give the alarm.

"De folks won't be abed," he soliloquized, "an' I'll bet I kick up the liveliest sort ave a row."

Chuckling as he thought of this prospect, he quieted Black Joe, and held him by reassuring methods so that he would not close on the pursued.

It was only four miles to the village, and as they turned the nose of a hill, Tommy saw the lights gleaming just ahead. The crisis was close at hand.

The carriage was going at a rate of speed comparatively easy, and Tommy believed that he had not been seen, or, if seen, that no danger had been apprehended from him. The carriage entered the village; the bareback rider did the same.

The street formation of the village was like that of a cross. There were two principal streets, which crossed each other at a given point, and where they intersected was a square around which were nearly all the business places, and where a crowd was usually congregated in the evening.

Tommy waited until near this square, and then he dug his bare heels into Black Joe's sides and went shooting forward at increased speed. Nearer and nearer he drew, and, just before they entered the square, he raised his voice in shrill shouts.

"Stop thief! Hey! hold on there! Stop thief! Say, stop dat team! STOP THIEF!"

Sharp, clear and piercing, his boyish face made itself heard above all other sounds, and as there were plenty of idlers in the square, at least a score of men and boys turned their eyes upon him.

He pointed persistently at the carriage, and kept up his cries.

"Stop thief! Say, stop de carriage! Stop thief!"

It is a magic cry. It will start the alert city man, or the slow-going countryman, like a powder explosion. It did not fail in the present case.

The driver of the carriage looked around in a startled way, revealing the face of Martin Connors, and then applied the whip to his horses; but at the same moment several stout young fellows sprang forward to stop him. One laid hold of the off horse, but Martin struck out with his long whip, cutting the man across the face, and the horses bolted past the other would-be interceptors.

"Stop thief!"

Still arose Tommy Flynn's voice shrilly.

He sped after the carriage while all the others stood still; but the man who had received the cut of the whip put his hand to his face and took it away stained with blood. The skin had been broken on his chin—a simple wound, but enough to fire the blood of his friends.

They rushed after the fugitives in a body, and their voices were added to Tommy Flynn's.

Luck was against the fugitives. Just when they seemed to have a clear street and a very promising future, a heavy, loaded wagon came rumbling toward the square. Its driver heard the cries and understood the situation, and he deliberately reined his horses to one side, so that the ponderous wagon crossed the street.

Connors essayed to pass, but he had miscalculated the amount of room needed. His off forward wheel struck the big wagon, and Martin turned a somersault and landed heavily on the ground, while his horses dashed away, with only the harness attached to them. They had broken loose from the carriage.

Almost immediately the door of the latter vehicle was thrown open, and a tall, dark-faced man sprang out.

It was Jason Bostwick!

Turning for a moment he pulled a burden out after him, and threw it across his shoulder. At his right was a lumber-yard, with the mill beyond. His quick eyes had marked this as the only chance open to him, and he ran rapidly in among the piled-up lumber, bearing his burden as he had placed it.

The pursuers gazed in astonishment. The burden which he carried was—a boy!

"Sthop him!" yelled Tommy Flynn. "Sthop de p'ison cr'ather?"

But Bostwick had the lead, and he ran well. The pursuers gained, but he was nearing the goal of his hopes. He reached a high pile of lumber near the river bank, and, with a last great effort, scrambled up its sloping side. Once there, he gave a look of satisfaction beyond. Below him was the pond, yet near enough so that a bold leap would take him to its friendly embrace.

Then he turned upon his pursuers, a revolver in his hand.

"Back!" he shouted. "Keep back, or some of you will be dead men!"

Clear and firm sounded the threat, but confusion followed it. He had noticed as he went up that the lumber-pile tottered under his weight, but he had disregarded what seemed to be a small thing. Now, however, there was a sudden jar, and the top of the pile slipped off like snow in a mountain avalanche.

Half of the big pile went clattering toward the river.

One pair of eyes that witnessed it were very sharp, and Tommy Flynn saw Bostwick's late burden shoot clear of everything and strike in the pond.

Tommy gave a yell. He could swim like a fish, and he plunged in at once. He knew what he was after; he knew the vital need of haste.

The others did not go so far. They heard a faint cry from under the lumber, and when one of their number cried, "He's buried under the boards!" they fell to and began to toss them aside. If a human being was caught under the heavy boards, after a fall of fifteen feet, his chances were poor.

They were still busy when the head of Tommy Flynn appeared near the bank. In his arms he bore some object which he carefully laid on firm land, and then he used his knife and cut sundry cords.

"Nick, ould b'ye, be ye alive?" he eagerly cried.

"Alive, and sound as a knot," answered the voice of Nick Nettle, faintly, but cheerfully.

At that moment the men bore forward another object, and carefully laid it down near Nick. It was Jason Bostwick, crushed, bleeding and unconscious.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DAY OF SURPRISES.

THE morning sun of the following day was shining brightly. Deputy-sheriff Lovering was in his office, and with him was Mr. Crooks and two other men. These two persons had a stern, alert appearance which at once suggested that they were detectives.

Some one tried the office-door, and then, as it proved to be locked, knocked promptly. Lovering answered the summons. He found Mr. Willis there, accompanied by Nick Nettle and Tommy Flynn.

"Good-morning," said Willis. "Are you busy?"

"No," Lovering replied. "Come in."

They obeyed, and took chairs. Mr. Crooks nodded genially to the boys, but Willis let no time go to waste.

"Young Nick Hunter has been informed that you want to see him, sheriff," he said.

"I did yesterday, but not now. Last night's events did away with the necessity."

"Do you refer to the arrest of King Hughes?"

"Yes."

"And do you think you have the guilty man?"

"There isn't a doubt of it."

"Pray, upon what do you base your theory?"

"Well, I don't believe in giving away my case, but you are such a prominent man in town that I don't mind giving you a few points. You will remember that, right at the start, our fellow-townsmen, Thomas Nelson, certified that he saw a man coming out of the Hemenway house, on the night of the murder. He claimed to not know who the man was, but, in course of time, we got the idea that he knew more than he had told. We put the screws on him, and he finally spoke out. The man was King Hughes. And Nelson told me more."

"On the night of the murder he saw Hughes and Ellice come meet by the old well. Hughes had been drinking, and he recklessly showed a knife. Ellice prevailed on him to let her have it, but what became of the knife Nelson did not see. He did not hear much of the talk, but that little showed him that Hughes insisted on going in to see Hemenway, while Ellice tried to keep him back. He went, however, was gone half an hour, and then came out."

"This was all Nelson could tell."

"We have worked hard, and we now know

that the old squire, feeling pity for Ellice, had resolved to reform Hughes if he could. He had him at the house several times, trying to form some practical plan for his future, and always secretly. It was not the good old squire's way to parade his good deeds. Hughes and Ellice were his only confidants."

"Once on the track we found a good deal of corroborative evidence, and, when we arrested Hughes, we heard words on his part which amounted to a confession. He was taking leave of Ellice, preparatory to fleeing the country, as he said to her in plain words that a reward was offered for the squire's murderer, and he should be hunted like a wild beast. Also, he asked her if she would join him in a place of safety, if he ever got there, reminding her that he was 'stained with the old squire's blood.' Such were his own words. So, Willis, you see that we have a clear case."

"Yet, you are wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Wrong!" Willis repeated.

"How so?"

"Hughes is innocent."

"Surely, Willis, you will not let your old, mistaken sympathy for the wretch run away with your better judgment—"

"Not in the least, Lovering," Willis coolly replied. "Have patience. Will you give me and my side a clear floor for a few minutes?"

"Certainly."

"Then let me introduce my chief witness, Nicholas Hunter, alias Nick Nettle. Nick, go to the front!"

The boy faced the sheriff with a faint smile.

"Mr. Lovering," said he, "you told Tommy Flynn yesterday that you wanted to see me. Well, if you had found me, I could have told you startling news."

"Then why didn't you come to me?"

"I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because I was a prisoner."

"Where?"

"In the hands of the man who killed old Squire Hemenway."

Lovering's lip curled scornfully.

"And who, pray, was that?"

"Jason Bostwick!"

"Nonsense!"

"Don't you believe it?"

"No!" the sheriff promptly replied.

Nick turned to Mr. Willis, who passed over a folded paper, and the boy handed it to Lovering.

"That paper," explained Willis, "is, barring some legal omissions, an exact copy of a document now in the hands of Solomon Eaton, justice of the peace, of the town of Daleport. Read, if you please!"

And Lovering read as follows:

"I, Jason Bostwick, being near the hour of death, but still of unimpaired mind, do solemnly make oath that the statements here to follow are correct in every respect."

"I am the murderer of my grand-uncle, Squire Hemenway. I killed him to the sooner secure his money. There was no other motive, and I had no accomplice. On the night of the murder I arrived at the Hemenway house, having very secretly made the journey. I entered the house through a window over the old lean-to shed. Once inside I put an old coat belonging to Martin Connors on over my own garments, to avoid blood-marks. Then I went to my uncle's room and killed him while he slept. The coat belonging to Connors, which I wore, and the knife with which I did the deed, I hid in a hollow tree in Stearns's Wood about one hundred feet from the edge of the wood."

"After that I hastened away and made good my escape; and when I was notified of the murder, and asked to come on, I took due time so as to excite no suspicion. I make this confession at the point of death, solemnly declaring that I, and I alone, am guilty of the murder."

"Another matter—"

Lovering looked up in bewilderment.

"I don't understand this at all," he declared.

"If Bostwick killed the old squire, what of King Hughes, and the circumstances which seem to prove him guilty?"

"Circumstantial evidence!"—a lingering relic of barbarism which our laws should crush out—for it is an outrage to man's intelligence, and a fatal danger to the most honest of us," Willis replied. "I believe in capital punishment, but to convict by circumstantial evidence is infamous. But let Nick Nettle speak again, let him tell how he learned that Bostwick was guilty."

"Go on, Nick."

"The evening that the old barn was burned," tersely explained the boy, "I was captured by a tramp. He took me to the barn, tied and gagged me, and put me in a box. He then left the

place. Shortly after two other men entered the barn—Bostwick and Martin Connors."

"It seems that Connors mistrusted his new master, and, wishing to gain a stronger hold upon him, he followed when Bostwick started for the village, not caring to speak near Mrs. Connors, lest she should hear. The talk, begun outside, was finished in the barn, the men sitting on the box above me."

"Bostwick denied having killed the squire, but Connors had considerable proof, and Bostwick finally agreed to give him a thousand dollars. This was as good as a confession."

"Just then the barn showed signs of fire—I suppose the tramp dropped a match carelessly. Of course I preferred discovery to being buried alive, and I kicked lustily. Bostwick and Connors knocked off the cover of the box, and then there was a scene. I had overheard their talk. What was to be done? They soon decided."

"They took me to the Hemenway house, and shut me up in an upper room, putting bars on the window, but, before twenty-four hours, I found a way of beating them. I couldn't get out, but I saw the dog, Prince, outside, and spoke to him. He always liked me, and was now delighted."

"Then I had an idea. I had a pencil and a scrap of paper; I wrote a note, fastened it to a stick and threw it out. Prince seized it. I managed to get my arm through the bars and point to the village."

"Go!" said I; "go, good fellow!"

"I think it was all chance, but Prince did start off for the village, just as if he knew what was wanted. As luck would have it, he soon met Tommy Flynn, and Tommy, seeing the stick and note, took them from him, and then knew just what had happened to me. He at once came to rescue me—"

"I ought ter hev gone to de sheriff fur help," put in Tommy.

"Well, it all come out right," kindly replied Nick. "Soon after Tommy got there Bostwick and Connors took me away, bound and gagged, in a close carriage. Tommy pursued on the horse Black Joe, and overtook us at Daleport. A fight followed, and a pile of boards fell upon Bostwick and injured him fatally. He only lived to make this confession, and then died."

Lovering sprang to his feet.

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed; "there is something here which I can't explain. If Bostwick did the deed, the circumstantial evidence against King Hughes goes for nothing, but what of his own words to Ellice, which seemed to show that he was guilty? I'll have him in."

Hughes was brought; the confession of Bostwick was read; and then King was asked to explain.

He did so with great tears running down his cheeks.

Squire Hemenway had been trying to reform Hughes; to cure his appetite for liquor and make him worthy of Ellice. The evening of the murder he went to the old squire so intoxicated that the latter sent him away. Hughes went out, drank more liquor and lost consciousness. When Ellice arose the next morning she found Hughes in the Hemenway kitchen in a drunken sleep. She aroused him and sent him away, but when, an hour later, the murder of Hemenway was discovered, both she and Hughes believed that he had done the deed while so much under the influence of liquor as not to know what he was doing.

This was the explanation of the whole mystery. The knife in the well was Hughes's, put there by Ellice!

"Thank Heaven, said King, tremulously, in conclusion, "I am not guilty. I have wondered that there was not a drop of blood on my hands, but circumstances were so awfully against me—I certainly entered the kitchen through the window, while drunk—that I thought I was guilty. This will be a lesson to me. Hear me all, when I swear that I will drink no liquor from this time!"

"A good resolution, young man!" said Mr. Crooks, heartily. "Stick to it and you'll come out all right. Now, I have a word to say. Bostwick is dead, and there seems to be no heir to Hemenway's estate. Wrong! There is one. Bostwick was never the heir. It was a girl, whom all who knew of her have long supposed dead. She was the child of parents who lived unhappily. The father led the mother a miserable life, and the latter dying, left her girl-baby to me. I found a good home for it, but gave the man who adopted it no clew to her parentage. Gentlemen, the real heiress is known to you as Martha Willis!"

Astonishment fell upon all, even Willis, but Crooks went on rapidly:

"I can prove all I say. The real father died a month ago, and, knowing he could not now persecute the child as he had his wife, I came on here to tell the secret. I arrived at such an exciting time that I made no haste to tell the truth."

"Then you are not a detective?" asked Nick. "I?" laughed the old gentleman. "Heaven bless you, no!—never thought of being one."

"You have met one detective, Nicholas," put in one of the strangers. "I am a detective, sent here to unravel the mystery. I have just learned that I had a rival on the field—a very unscrupulous fellow, who ought to be in prison, himself. He has been disguised as a tramp, and called himself Ben Gleason. No doubt it was he who shut you up in the barn. I actually believe he was jealous of you, and afraid you would solve the mystery ahead of him."

"Just what the lad has done," declared Crooks.

"Not alone," demurred Nick, modestly.

"Tommy Flynn helped me."

"Begorra, I didn't do much," protested Tommy.

"You have both done nobly!" exclaimed Lovering.

The Hememway case was past. Death had claimed Bostwick, but his confession settled all. The part of his confession not read by Lovering told how he and Connors had once stolen a will made by Hemenway, and explained their mysterious talk overheard by Nick in the early part of this story.

Connors was arrested, but, escaping conviction on a technicality, took his wife and left the town forever.

The unscrupulous detective, known as Ben Gleason, had thought that Nick was burned in the old barn. He was really horrified, for it was all his work. Sheriff Lovering gave him attention for setting fire to the barn, and he was glad to escape by paying a sum of money to make good the loss. He confessed that he was the mysterious person who stole the oiled silk package from the old garret, and collided in the dark with Nick. He had been searching there, and had seized the package because he thought it might be important. It was not of any value.

Having made this statement he left the place in haste.

Martha Willis succeeded to the squire's property, and has since married happily. Mr. Crooks was her friend and adviser, and he also proved a true friend to "Nick Nettle." He partially adopted the lad, sent him to school and then to college, and it is due to him that Nick is now a successful lawyer.

Ellice and King Hughes were married. Twelve years have passed, and King has never broken his vow of reform. He is a kind husband and good citizen. His lesson was lasting.

Tommy Flynn is in business, and he and Nick have never abandoned their friendship. Their good fortune is well deserved.

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